

Andreas Trossek

**When Did It Get
Political?
Soviet Film
Bureaucracy and
Estonian Hand-Drawn
Animation**

This paper deals with the problematic issue of the highly politicised concept of national culture during the Soviet occupation/colonisation in Estonia, by focusing on some aspects of the field of cinema. Estonian traditional cel animation, on the whole, provides a good case study: while being initially, that is, in the early 1970s, no more than a marginal factor in public space, local animation still managed to become as important in the Estonian cultural sphere as fine arts, music or literature by the late 1980s. Why? Films produced in the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic were subject to Soviet film censorship and over the course of years this fact has led to the common understanding that something ‘political’ or ‘anti-Soviet’ had to be there. However, while reviewing some examples of reportedly censored or ‘shelved’ animated films, in retrospect one notices a presumption rather than proof behind this argumentation. It has become almost a necessity in the recent history of Estonian film to see Soviet animated films as ‘political’ works *a priori*, as national statements within the Soviet empire, and it is a question of deductive rather than inductive reasoning. Nowadays, animation is certainly not a marginal issue in Estonia. On the contrary, it is a hallmark of local cultural heritage and something highly valued in a country of only about 1.4 million people.¹ This is a quite a leap from the hierarchical position of animation in Soviet cinema, where animators *en masse* were most likely seen as a bit goofy and childish film-makers, usually keen on caricature or book illustration (or not so nicely put: as semi-amateurish artists producing silly cartoons for little children). Which cultural mechanisms made this situation possible, this ‘imagological shift’ from Disney to Dante (not to mention from Cheburashka to Che Guevara)? In this paper, I will investigate which cultural factors, no matter how broad or general, enabled Estonian drawn animation to enter the area of national ‘high’ culture during the 1980s. As absurd as it may seem, was it due to a specific cultural discourse of Soviet dissidence that made even these short films seem more dangerous than they really were? So the question is: when did it get ‘political’ for the Estonian animators?

AGAINST DOMINATING TRENDS, AGAINST DOGMAS

The Soviet cinema authorities rejected two Estonian hand-drawn animated films in 1977 and in 1978. In 1977, Goskino (the USSR State Committee for Cinematography, in Russian Государственный комитет по кинематографии СССР or Госкино) rejected the directorial debut of the young Estonian film-maker Priit Pärn (b. 1946), who had recently become an employee of the Tallinnfilm studio in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, which then was the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. With his idiosyncratic and non-conventional drawing style and abundant sense of the absurd, Pärn had earned the reputation of being a talented caricaturist, mainly due to the popular humour magazine *Pikker* and the cultural weekly *Sirp ja Vasar*, which quite often featured Pärn’s works. Nevertheless, Pärn’s ten-minute *Is the Earth Round? (Kas maakera on ümmargune?, 1977)*, produced by Tallinnfilm, was met with feelings of dismay in Moscow. Eventually Goskino disapproved the debut because of its obviously crude design and perhaps too vague plot. As a result, the film received a license for screening only within the limits of the Estonian SSR.² A year later another Estonian animated film was rejected in Moscow, following a similar path: officially it was forbidden to show this film in other parts of the Soviet Union, or to distribute it anywhere else in the world. This time it was *Vacuum Cleaner (Tolmuimeja, 1978)*, a ten-minute film directed by Avo Paistik (b. 1936), which featured pop art/photo-realist

1 See, for example, the web pages of the Estonian Institute (<http://www.einst.ee/publications/culture/>) and the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (http://www.um.ee/estonia/kat_174/pea_174/405.html), which promote animation as a significant part of contemporary Estonian culture.

2 Reportedly considered ‘too pessimistic’ at its first screening in Moscow, Goskino officials suggested a different ending to the film. In the initial director’s cut, the protagonist, who has travelled around the world to see whether it is actually round or not (hence the title of the film), looks old and wrinkled after his journey, in which he has ended up in the same place where he once started; however, to get his film approved, Priit Pärn added one scene: the old man looks into the mirror and sees a reflection of a young boy, i.e. himself when he was at the beginning of his world tour/life (Pärn 2003).

artwork by Rein Tammik (b. 1947), who had stood out as a talented ‘shocker’ among Estonian painters since the early 1970s. Yet, the initial project evolved and an innocent fairy tale for small children grew into a cold emotionless display of pop aesthetics that would make Kraftwerk LP covers look cute and cuddly, and at certain moments Tammik’s trendy artwork gave the film horrifying undertones.³ The finished production was abruptly rejected by Goskino and not accepted for wider screening until 1987 (Teinemaa 1992: 10). Even in hindsight, the film seems more an ‘art film’ for adults than an unpretentious cartoon for children, which it was meant to be. Both rejected animated films could be screened in the limited number of Soviet Estonian movie theatres and, after a period of time, they could also be shown on local television (Pärn 2003). And that was that.

After these two events, however, no animated films from Soviet Estonia were disapproved as final products in Moscow. From then on, a new era of semi-conflicts and quasi-compromises began in local animation production, because the worst had already happened. Although these films were not literally ‘shelved’ (i.e. not released for public viewing) in the Soviet Union, limiting their distribution to the small republic’s few cinemas and one local television channel was certainly an effective punishment, very close to the actual fact of ‘shelving’. The local studio, which had initially put money into the productions, had now lost everything, because no copies were ordered. And it seems like the film-makers had learned their lesson, too. Many working hours had been spent on films that *post factum* were not really shown anywhere, because a film rejected in Moscow could not get to film festivals abroad either (Kiik 2003).

Nevertheless, it is the main argument in this paper that it was precisely in these years—the late 1970s and early 1980s—that a particular phenomenon was born, at first in Soviet Estonia, then gradually spreading all over the Soviet Union and finally to the whole world (of animation). Namely, a broader image of Estonian cel animation as something quite original and prone to international recognition was beginning to form. This process had already

begun with serious-minded, painterly films, which the founder of Tallinnfilm’s drawn animation division Joonisfilm (established in 1971), Rein Raamat (b. 1931), was beginning to direct in the second half of the 1970s; but this process only became stronger when the topic of ‘shelved films’ came along.

In contrast to the mainly children-oriented productions of the dominant Soyuzmultfilm studio (Союзмультфильм, founded in 1936), Estonian animation was presented in most press reviews as very artistic and ‘adult’. Philosophical plots and artistic originality were dominant over simple fairy tales and Disney-like aesthetics. It is well remembered and also documented in the contemporary film press in the 1980s that both adults and children greatly enjoyed Pärn’s humorous, yet complicated, paradoxical and quite figuratively fast-thinking films, of which especially *Some Exercises in Preparation for Independent Life* (*Harjutusi iseseisvaks eluks*, 1980) and *The Triangle* (*Kolmnurk*, 1982) stand out. Raamat was also eager to promote animation as a ‘high’ art form for an adult audience and directed most of his films according to that principle. His *Big Tõll* (*Suur Tõll*, 1980) featured artwork by Jüri Arrak (b. 1936), a painter who was at that time one of the most established artistic figures in the country. After films like Raamat’s *Hell* (*Põrgu*, 1983), a nearly twenty-minute cel cartoon that referred to the prints of the well-known Estonian draughtsman Eduard Wiiralt (1898–1954), or Pärn’s twenty-seven-minute *Luncheon on the Grass* (*Eine murul*, 1987), which has been mentioned as one of the best Estonian films ever by the renowned local film critic Jaan Ruus, there was no question about it—Estonian animation was a ‘brand’, a ‘trademark’ in itself. And the cornerstones of this ‘brand’ were formal originality, artistic seriousness, and, implicitly, a hidden criticism of the Soviet system.

To make these arguments clearer—animation was and still is a typically marginal, ‘low’ field of cultural activity all around the world, yet in Soviet Estonia it gained the status of being as important as feature film, literature, poetry or gallery-centred ‘high’ arts.⁴ If we were to reconstruct the public reception of these films, we would undoubtedly acknowledge that some

political issues might have been in place. For Estonian viewers, a critique of the system quietly underlay all of this, although film reviewers publicly talked about qualities such as the grotesque and playful absurdity of Pärn's films, or the inherent seriousness and artistry of Raamat's works.⁵ Additionally, a certain type of 'Special Baltic Order'⁶ seemed to have been the common rule in Goskino when animators from Estonia entered the premises. Namely, Estonian cartoons had the privilege of being different in the context of the Soviet Union—or so the saying goes. Pärn remembers that in Soviet Estonia it was at least permitted to make some animation for adult audiences, while in other parts of the Union it was usually forbidden (Jokinen 1998). Also, in other Soviet republics, Moscow often demanded to see the work at different phases, whereas in Estonia it was first completed and then sent to Moscow for approval.⁷

It seems that, until the almost synchronic rejection of the above-mentioned films, *Is the Earth Round?* and *Vacuum Cleaner*, a kind of common understanding existed in Tallinnfilm that a film-maker could not make an animated film which would be so bad (i.e. so 'non-soyuz-multifilm-like' both in content and visual design) that Goskino would not accept it. These two rejected films showed that this was a false assumption—creative freedom in animation was as limited as in live action film-making or in other areas of arts in the Soviet Union. The fact that traditional cel animation could also be a subject of closer ideological surveillance meant a much clearer invitation into the world of Soviet censorship, which had cast its shadow on all cultural activities, but especially on film production.⁸ If making cartoons was not a political game before, it certainly was a political game now. This situation remained largely unchanged until the perestroika years and ultimately the collapse of the Soviet Union, along with its film system, in 1991.

This paper is largely based on interviews I conducted in 2003⁹ with key figures in Tallinnfilm's animation division who directly dealt with Goskino in those years. These interviews are a focal point of my research here and it is a strategic choice to favour personal remembrances over written (historical) accounts,

such as 'official' Soviet film history. Moreover, in the current situation the academic papers on this issue are still fairly scarce. Material from the Estonian Film Archives (Eesti Filmiarhiiv) has been a significant historical source, yet the broadly generalised topic of this paper dictates that detailed references to records of Tallinnfilm

3 The horror especially stands out in the scenes where the vacuum cleaner has gone out of control and starts to 'consume' the outside world, becoming bigger and bigger every second. The authors of the film have retrospectively indicated that the red colour of the vacuum cleaner also had political implications (i.e. red as the Soviet flag), but there are no documents which would show that Goskino officials had 'decoded the message' in a similar vein.

4 In 2007, Pärn had a solo exhibition of his prints and drawings in the Kumu Art Museum (for more detail, see Trossek 2007: 12–48), the new building of the Art Museum of Estonia that opened the year before. Before him, only three Estonian artists, Mark Raidpere, Jüri Arrak and Jaan Toomik, had been given the honour of having a solo exhibition there.

5 In fact, this is precisely why I have 'flirted' with post-colonial studies—in order to explain why sometimes a cartoon is not just simply a cartoon in Estonia's recent cultural history (Trossek 2006: 98–128).

6 I owe this flamboyant comparison to the film critic Lauri Kärk, who agrees that sometimes Goskino officials approved Tallinnfilm's animated films simply because they were done by Estonian animators (and if the same film had been produced in another Soviet republic, things might have turned out quite differently). From Goskino's point of view, Estonians were considered stubborn film-makers, yet they were handy when 'atypical' material for international film festivals was needed. As the saying goes, history repeats itself as farce. The 'Special Baltic Order' lasted from 1710 to 1850, when both the Swedish state and the tsars of the Russian Empire guaranteed the continuation of Baltic Germans' special class privileges and administration rights in the Baltic region when they incorporated the lands into their respective empires.

7 The answer could be, 'Okay', or 'Make some changes', or 'It might be screened in some parts of the country' or a complete 'No' (Jokinen 1998).

8 The most well-known and widely publicised examples of film censorship in Estonian animation are connected, again, to Prit Pärn. To this day, two different versions of his *Time Out (Aeg maha)*, 1984 exist—the official and the unofficial. An earlier film from 1982, entitled *The Triangle*, was approved in Moscow but, as Pärn refused to cut certain parts from the film, Goskino figuratively 'cut out' a remarkable part of normal distribution rates by ordering only a handful of copies.

9 I thank Silvia Kiik, who was the head of puppet and drawn animation division in Tallinnfilm, a film critic and the former editor of the animation division, Jaan Ruus and the film-makers Rein Raamat and Prit Pärn for their explanations and insight. For more general issues, I owe gratitude to the head of Tallinnfilm between 1984 and 1989 (and an editor at the studio beginning in 1969), Enn Rekkor, whom I was able to talk to a few months before he suddenly passed away.

board meetings or different versions of scripts have to wait for some other opportunity. By comparing recollections and 'data fragments' from interviews, archive materials and press coverage regarding the late 1970s and early 1980s in Estonian animation, I hope to demonstrate how Soviet cinema administration produced both fear and disobedience and how film-makers soon rebelled against Goskino as a mandatory part of the game we call film-making.

SOVIET FILM PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION, OR, THE RULES OF THE GAME

It is a well-known fact that, in Moscow, different officials of Goskino routinely supervised everything that was produced on film in the Soviet Union (thus covering, at least in theory, pretty much everything that was filmed in an area of approximately 22,400,000 km², which was the total area of the USSR!). All the films made in different republics ended up at Goskino's headquarters and the only Estonian film studio, Tallinnfilm, also belonged to this network of production and distribution. Goskino, which was responsible for Soviet Estonian film production until the late 1980s, nominally started to work as a branch of the Council of Ministers of the USSR in 1963, although in reality the headquarters in Moscow had a history that went back to the 1920s (Butovsky *et al.* 2004). The fact that Soviet film production was heavily involved with ideological tenets and that a complicated concept of authorship was in place is well illustrated by the practise that film-makers not only had to defend their film proposals in local studios, film committees and cultural ministries, but also in Moscow, where most of the cinema administration of the former Eastern Bloc resided. In a nutshell—there were a lot of bureaucrats. The Soviet Union consisted of fifteen republics and each had its own Goskino subcommittee or branch organisation, which was in fact a local miniature version of the headquarters in Moscow (Golovskoy 1986: 43). However, these republican committees were by no means without authority; for example, within the limits of the republic, local cinema officials

could refuse to show a film that had acquired an all-Union screening licence from Goskino. Only international promotion and distribution was an exception. Moscow handled foreign affairs unilaterally (Golovskoy 1986: 44) almost until the collapse of the Soviet system and Moscow also decided which films were allowed to go to international festivals.

The heads of different smaller film studios and officials from republican film committees made regular visits to Moscow, seeking approval of their production plans and applying for funds from Goskino to produce new films (Orav 2003: 37). If a film was in production already, the editors-in-chief of specific film divisions took over. They travelled to Goskino, sometimes accompanied by directors ready to defend their creative agendas. It has already been pointed out that republican leaders were 'trusted' to a certain extent and only local newsreels (in the Estonian language) were supervised by the film committee of the Estonian SSR (Ruus 2000: 12), although this generalisation is not entirely accurate. Goskino indeed financed and thus authorised the production of feature films, both puppet and cel animation, and full-length documentary films, but, in addition to these newsreels, all shorter documentaries were also trusted to the care of local film committees.¹⁰ The rest was, nevertheless, strictly Goskino's business. According to Goskino's administrative rules, film reels were literally checked meter by meter. While monitoring both the 'level of artistry' and 'ideological correctness', it may come as a slight surprise that Goskino had its eyes also on animation—despite the fact that most of these were oriented to small children and therefore appear to have been quite innocent. Yet the contract forms of Tallinnfilm, which were signed by film directors, clearly state that the director had to secure 'the accordance of the film to the mission of communist upbringing'.¹¹ Both in theory and practice, Goskino had to promote the Marxist-Leninist world-view (Orav 2003: 37) in all its productions, and children's films and animation were no exception.¹²

Tallinnfilm, which had existed under that name since 1961 (Orav 2003: 7), first produced puppet animation. The division of puppet animation was established in Tallinn in 1957;

the division of drawn animation did not exist until 1971. Using the method of trial and error, Elbert Tuganov (1920–2007) directed the first Estonian puppet film, *Peter's Dream* (*Peetrikese unenägu*, 1958), which formed a basis for a more regular production of animation in the years to come.¹³ One artist engaged in this adventurous project was Rein Raamat, who, after graduating from the State Art Institute (Eesti Riiklik Kunstiinstituut, ERKI) in Tallinn as a painter in 1957, worked on two more puppet films (*The Northern Frog* (*Põhja konn*, 1959) and *A Forest Tale* (*Metsamuinasjutt*, 1960)), but then left animation to become a set designer for feature films. As he has said, he simply did not want to play with dolls any more (Assenin 1986: 64). After working on well-known Estonian film classics such as *The New Old One of Põrgupõhja* (*Põrgupõhja uus Vanapagan*, 1964) and *The Last Relic* (*Viimne reliikvia*, 1969) Raamat nevertheless returned to animation, eventually leaving live-action film-making behind and establishing a unit of drawn animation in Tallinnfilm. Why? Raamat has said that, for the most part, it was due to his naïve wish to return to painting.¹⁴ Encouraged by his painter's diploma and previous experiences in film, Raamat decided to play his cards and was dealt a good hand quite soon.¹⁵ Tallinnfilm's cel animation division Joonisfilm was launched in 1971 and, naturally, Raamat was the first director appointed to that production unit.

Both the drawn and puppet animation divisions shared the same protocol of control. Resembling the pyramid-like structure that characterised Goskino's administration in Moscow, these departments, too, were subject to a similar multi-layered bureaucratic machinery, consisting of many people at different levels of authority. Both units shared the same editor-in-chief. The editors working on particular projects shared the responsibility of, more or less, 'baby-sitting' film-makers and securing the completion of the films by their deadlines. The editor-in-chief reported to the head of Tallinnfilm, who, in turn, reported to different officials at the republican cinematic committee (the State Committee for Cinematography under the Council of Ministers of the Estonian SSR). In the eyes of the average Estonian

film-maker, this committee nevertheless only duplicated (in theory and mostly in practice as well) the decisions Goskino had already made. All in all, it was nothing too complicated: the size and multi-layeredness of this control system guaranteed its effectiveness.

Regarding all the possible financial schemes in Soviet film production, it is fair to say that Moscow paid for everything. In legal terms, it made no difference whether it was an important film studio in Moscow or a peripheral republican studio somewhere else which did the actual job. All rights were reserved by Goskino, which meant it acted basically as a producer in the classical sense of the word (Ruus 2003). Firstly, Goskino decided whether the film would be successful or not by assigning a category to it. There were five categories or ranks: the highest, plus first, second, third and fourth (Golovskoy 1986: 47). Secondly,

10 E-mail communication with Lauri Kärk, April 11, 2007.

11 Documentation on production of Soviet Estonian cartoons is currently preserved in the State Archives of Estonia (Eesti Riigiarhiiv, ERA) and most folders routinely contain the referred to clause (see, e.g., ERA, f. R-1707, n. 1, s. 1559, l. 14).

12 True, there is nothing surprising in that situation as such, because Hollywood was concurrently doing exactly the same thing: all those images of the 'American Dream' juxtaposed with evil 'reds' or 'communists' et cetera.

13 The inspiration reportedly came after an inspection visit by a higher official from Moscow, who saw equipment for making film titles in Tallinnfilm and asked why no animated films were being produced in the studio (Tuganov 1998: 198). Tuganov, who had acquired a small amount of experience in animation as a small boy while earning pocket money in a film studio in the Third Reich, immediately liked the idea (Ruus 1991: 8). He decided in favour of puppet animation because the Tallinnfilm studio was too small for drawn animation. As a rule, a starting director would have needed guidance from a Soviet animator with more experience, but people from Moscow turned Tuganov down. The first Estonian puppet film was therefore made with a little help from a little white lie: Tuganov told the officials that a Moscow puppet instructor was coming to Tallinn very shortly, as soon as the technical groundwork and test-shootings were completed (for comparison, see both Ruus 1991: 5 and Lokk 1982: 47).

14 For comparison, see Assenin 1986: 64–65 and Ruus, Teinmaa 1991: 8.

15 Before launching Tallinnfilm's drawn animation unit, Raamat visited one of the most established Russian cartoonists of that time, Fyodor Khitruk (b. 1917), in order to learn more about the technique of animation. Over the years Raamat befriended many famous Soviet animators, among them Yuri Norstein (b. 1941), Eduard Nazarov (b. 1941) and Andrey Khrzhanovsky (b. 1939).

Goskino dictated where and for how long the film was shown—either by declaring it to be fit for screening all over the USSR (the number of copies made from the negative was also decided in Moscow) or by confining it to a few local, that is, republican screens (and let's not forget that only Goskino could send the final product abroad). All copyrights, together with full rights of distribution, belonged to Goskino, which financed the projects. Distribution information remained scarce. For example, for an author from a small republican studio such as Tallinnfilm, how their work was received in other parts of the Soviet Union was almost classified information. Feedback was almost non-existent, so much so that one film-maker even wrote a retrospective article in 1991, which he entitled bitterly 'Masterpiece for the self' (Škubel 1991: 87). To attain information about the fate of their work, film-makers had to rely on personal word-of-mouth information—sometimes nothing more than simple gossip. As it was, a separate branch organisation of Goskino, Sovexportfilm, existed, which handled all distribution outside the USSR—as soon as the films were dubbed in Russian, they were good enough for export (Orav 2003: 37).

The common notion that Tallinnfilm was basically a state-owned studio is therefore incorrect in a narrow sense, because the state apparatus of the ESSR, namely the Council of Ministers, had nothing to do with financing the studio's daily work (Rekkor 2003). The first film ever supported from the annual budget of the Estonian SSR was Arvo Kruusement's *Autumn* (Sügis, 1990) (Kärk 2000: 4)—the final part of his film trilogy, based on a series of popular novels by the pre-war Estonian writer Oskar Luts—but this did not happen until the political situation in the perestroika-led USSR had changed dramatically. Running the studio in previous years was more similar to the practise of an independent company: in order to produce a film, the studio took out a loan from the state bank (republican office of the State Bank of the USSR), which was guaranteed by a commission in Moscow handling film distribution all over the Soviet Union (basically another one of Goskino's sub-organisations) (Rekkor 2003). Therefore, the main goal from a studio's point

of view was to guarantee that the film would successfully go through 'Goskino's castration machine'¹⁶ at every possible stage, because it meant a Union-wide screening licence for the final product and the annulment of the bank loan. In this way, almost a symbiotic circulation of credit took place between Goskino's distribution arm, the State Bank of the USSR and the film studio.

So, for purely financial reasons, the system had to work immaculately. First, the film had to be finished by deadline, and then it had to be approved by the officials in Goskino; only then did distribution possibilities open up. If the studio could not meet these two requirements, Goskino's guarantee was automatically cancelled (for the distributor, 'shelved' films did not exist) and the bank acquired jurisdiction for collecting payments from the studio (Rekkor 2003). This would naturally mean a financial loss to the studio, but what had even more of a disciplinary effect, that is, on a personal level, if the production schedule was over deadline or the film was rejected in Goskino, people in the studio lost their bonuses, including the 'thirteenth monthly salary'. Additionally, when the film was assigned the fourth, that is, the lowest category by Goskino, which signalled a complete failure, film-makers had their production fees (*lavastustasu*) reduced to zero, as final payments were closely interconnected with film circulation policies. If Goskino gave a film the fourth rank, the studio lost the funds that were allocated to make copies for distribution, which was actually the only way the studio could earn money in the closed trade system of the Eastern Bloc (Kiik 2003). In short, such 'ideological-artistic failures' were to be prevented at all costs, as the studio's annual budget was fixed at the beginning of each year.

It seems that *homo sovieticus* always had to live in the future, never looking back, never asking what had happened. Statistics on viewership were virtually unknown in the Soviet Union; information about ticket sales was reportedly gathered only in the first year of each film's release (Ruus 1987: 3). Nor was there an official time limit on the distribution period. However, everyday practice had demonstrated that a single film copy would not last more

than 400 screenings, and most film reels were already severely damaged after they had been run through a projector 300 times (Golovskoy 1986: 50).

It is also clear that the ranks or categories that Goskino assigned to films were not regarded as public information. Nor were the categories meant to be indicators of the 'ideological-artistic level'. The average Soviet cinema goer did not even know that they existed. The ranking system had no clear causal connections with a film's release and distribution, as it seems at first glance. Rather, these categories were simply needed to legitimise the way people got paid. The highest category meant a bonus for the film director, which was remarkably higher than the pay check that came with, for example, the third rank—meaning that it was in the interests of the studio, which cashed out these checks, that an average film would also get an average rank and be assigned the second category by Goskino (Rekkor 2003). (Soviet film production *en masse* ironically fitted these criteria rather well.) In reality, the studio usually proposed a lower rank, if the production process had been problematic. As a process, the categorisation of films followed a 'pyramidal logic', which was quite common everywhere in this system—in order to get an initiative approved, it was sent from the studio to the next level of political-legal authority, until the proposal ended up on Goskino's officials' desks.

Similarly, some clear sets of formalities were to be fulfilled before a film could go into production. A literary script that was accepted both by the Tallinnfilm's Artistic Council and the Committee for Cinematography of the ESSR was sent to Moscow for approval. Goskino's editorial office of scripts usually demanded some changes and corrections, which the studio had to implement. Then the process of revising the script began. This also meant, automatically, that Goskino had not rejected the proposal and that the film became a part of the studio's annual production plan. Thus the second phase could start: the script was appointed to a chosen director who began working with his/her version of it—the director's script (the cycle of changes and corrections usually also continued within the studio); simultaneously, agreements

were signed with people working on the project (Rekkor 2003). The third phase consisted of practical work: shooting, editing etc. And all of this had to be finished by deadline. Otherwise Goskino could temporarily freeze or permanently stop the project simply with a telegram. When it came to scripts, improvising was equated with 'drifting off course' and Goskino therefore considered it an entirely prohibited activity. The script was sacred and diverging openly from the approved version brought along sanctions. In animation, a film-maker could change some details, but only in the visual design and not in the plot of the film (Ruus 2003). In this regard, animators had another advantage, as Goskino officials usually did not bother to check whether the actual plot of the finished film coincided with the exact wording of the approved script (in this respect, animation was not considered that important). The script of an animated film was usually not longer than three or four pages, generally there was no dialogue and in some cases it required quite a lot of imagination to 'decipher' the story the director had put down on paper. Still, exceptions existed among officials and that usually meant extra work for film-makers. Handing over the final product to Goskino could, therefore, be regarded as the fourth and the last phase of production. Goskino could: a) accept the film and order it to be dubbed into Russian, or b) make demands to the film director to change a thing or two and set another date for re-assessment, or c) declare that the final product was a complete 'ideological-artistic failure' that could never be publicly shown (thus the notion of 'shelved' films).

Needless to say, getting approval from Goskino was a critical issue and how the editor of the studio and the film director justified their work sometimes decided the fate of a finished film. There was also the ever-crucial human factor—which officials served on the evaluation commission at a particular moment and how they regarded the film's director's previous works or the output of his/her home studio in general (Kiik 2003). At the same time, the

16 This catchy phrase was publicly used by the film critic Tiina Lokk (Lokk 1989: 57) as early as 1989, when the Soviet empire was still standing.

process of approval of different films could vary significantly, so Goskino's reception always remained largely unpredictable for the film-maker (Pärn 2003). The metaphor of an imaginary, yet ever-present front-line in the battle between film-makers and Goskino's monstrous apparatus seems to be perfectly apt: the author versus the bureaucrat. In short, film-makers dreaded Goskino. Every detail had to be explainable at every stage of production. Every action had to be concerted, changes approved, and general plans approved by higher authorities. A suitcase had to stay packed for a possible urgent flight to Moscow. The system was highly centralised and one can be quite sure that bitter jokes about how a Soviet film-maker was an 'honorary passenger of the national airline Aeroflot' (Ruus 1986: 74) were most common.

Before the odyssey of sending a script to Goskino for approval could start, it had to go through many 'filters' in the studio. In addition to the documented decisions of the Editorial Board of Tallinnfilm (members rotated after a certain period), written statements from the editor, the editor-in-chief and the head of the studio were also required. The head of the local Committee for Cinematography was the next link in the chain. All these instances had the right to demand changes. In Moscow, approximately three or four signatures were added to the film proposal (Ruus 2003). Nevertheless, according to the calculations of Lembit Remmelgas, a scriptwriter of many Estonian films and an editor at Tallinnfilm, no less than eleven organs existed in front of which the director had to defend the script (Ruus 1982: 42). If problems arose, an official of a lower rank had to answer to an official of a higher rank for not being careful enough. This guaranteed that the Soviet cinema bureaucracy always functioned as a highly motivated and fully trained, multi-level mechanism of control.

Still, it was primarily the studio editor's task to root out the biggest 'ideological mistakes' from the text. Besides advising film-makers in dramaturgical matters, the editor also had to eliminate all aspects that were politically dubious. In other words, the editor's mission was to foresee and prevent these mistakes and errors before they were made. Unlike the creative

agent, that is, the film director, who was always regarded as innocent by Goskino's standards (well, at least in theory), the true responsibility was on the editor's shoulders (Ruus 2003). Within the studio, the editor-in-chief of course carried the biggest burden in that sense, although the editor's 'normative' decisions also counted in the process (Kärk 2007). In bureaucratic jargon, the editor's mission was to be the *politruk* (политрук, 'political instructor') and to ensure that the artist would work 'for the cause' and move in the right direction without aberrations. Yet, in Soviet Estonia's cinematic system, the editor paradoxically took the opposing role, by becoming literally the director's advocate (Ruus 2003).

Concerning copies for distribution, the theoretical maximum in the Soviet Union was 2,000 (1,000 to 1,500 copies was normal even for extremely well-received films), although an average Soviet film, rated in the second rank, usually circulated on no more than two or three hundred copies (Golovskoy 1986: 48). However, if Goskino had given the film a lower rank, it might mean that viewers would see a black and white copy, instead of the original colour version. If needed, Goskino's officials had even more effective methods up their sleeves to limit distribution. According to Jaan Ruus, who worked as an editor of many early films by Priit Pärn, it was typical to first accept a problematic film such as Andrey Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (Зеркало, 1975), but then run it through the 'test screening period'; and the test audience in some god-forsaken back-country village would show, as expected, relatively little interest.¹⁷ This gave Soviet cinema bureaucrats a good and apparently democratic reason not to promote certain uncomfortably intellectual or experimental films, because they had received poor reaction locally and therefore 'the people do not want to see it' — *народ не смотрит* (Ruus 2003). Even today, in a time of post-Soviet folklore, many people sometimes have vague remembrances of films that 'were shown only once', 'were shown only on semi-public occasions and places' or 'were in fact made in colour although everybody thought it was a black-and-white film'.

On the other hand, occasions appeared when Goskino upgraded the rank *post factum*,

for example, if it had received a festival award (Pärn 2003) (a practice probably more common in animation than in other areas). Also, the category could be reconsidered if the film turned out to be very popular among cinema goers. Thus the seemingly reasonable assumption that ‘higher category equals wider distribution’ held more water in the case of propaganda films or works inclined to propaganda (Rekkor 2003), but otherwise there seemed to be no connection between assigned categories and the existing number of film copies. As it was, republican officials dealing with local cinema distribution decided, more or less independently, what films they took with them when they returned from Moscow and reportedly, already by the late 1970s, Estonians and Lithuanians stood out for their tendency to prefer home-made and foreign films to the production of other Soviet studios (Golovsky 1986: 49).

ORIGINAL IDEAS VS. REPUBLIC QUOTAS

As the documentation in the State Archives of Estonia indicates, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the production of a ten-minute (that is, one-reel) animated film cost 30,000 roubles on average. Up to a twenty-minute animated film (double-reel animation) cost 60,000 roubles. In comparison, the budget of a feature-length film was approximately 300,000 roubles (Ruus 2000: 12). Whereas in those days both human labour and film stock were relatively cheap, these numbers themselves do not reveal much; however, proportion proves to be the key when handling these particles of ‘statistical truth’. As the seventh edition of the Soviet Estonian Encyclopaedia (*Eesti Nõukogude Entsüklopeedia*), published in 1975, states, Tallinnfilm’s average yearly output was three feature films, fourteen documentaries, three puppet films and three cel animations (plus twenty-four newsreels). Therefore, the amount of money granted by Goskino to Estonian animators annually was quite large—about 180,000 roubles—more than half of the budget of a feature film.

The main reason why Moscow so readily supported animation was the fact that animated films were practically the only things suitable for

export. In other words, animated films equalled foreign currency for Goskino. Ideologically ‘charged’ Soviet feature films rarely attracted distributors’ interest in the capitalist West, whereas in the 1960s Goskino successfully sold puppet films by Elbert Tuganov everywhere in the Eastern Bloc and even to the other side of the Iron Curtain; only the United States remained ‘behind a wall’ (Kiik 2003). As a common practice, animated films were gathered on collection tapes usually lasting about an hour and these long-playing cassettes were then sold to television stations abroad.

Greatly as a consequence of this practice, a certain established policy held firm in Goskino: that animation was an art form which *belongs* to children: *мультипликация — это искусство для детей* (Kiik 2003). Officials at Moscow headquarters were glad to approve scripts of children’s films, but reluctant to allow more complicated themes or formally experimental approaches to surface. In theory, all republican studios had to be clones of Soyuzmultfilm. Producing animation ‘for adults’—naturally, non-pornographic—was clearly not welcomed by Goskino. Therefore a leveling of such tendencies within the studio or in the republican committees for cinema came as no surprise to more ‘adventurous’ directors.

Paradoxically, the desire to make as few children’s films as possible was the cornerstone of the strength of the school of Estonian animation and drawn animation in particular. And, in the end, Goskino officials did not seem to mind either. As the story goes, in the Soviet Union an ‘unwritten law’ existed according to which only one third of a studio’s annual animation production could be targeted to adults—and this was a ratio that Estonian animators were able to almost reverse by the end of the Soviet period (Raamat 2002).¹⁷ The fact that, for years, Tallinnfilm’s puppet animation division had worked in a steady and conservative vein provided considerable help in this respect. Their

17 Reportedly, *The Mirror* never had an official premiere and had only a limited, second category release, with only 73 copies; see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zerkalo>.

18 Silvia Kiik (2003) has also confirmed these remarks and calculations.

unhindered production of children's films actually made possible the realisation of more 'adult' or experimental ideas in the drawn animation department. Rein Raamat even remembers that in the early 1970s, when the drawn animation division in Tallinnfilm was launched and seventy percent of Estonian animated films had to address the children audiences, he was able to avoid directing children's films almost altogether, because Tallinnfilm's puppet film division people were fulfilling the republican quota (Robinson 2003: 94). Before the directorial duets of Riho Unt (b. 1956) and Hardi Volmer (b. 1957) in the mid-1980s, no sign of more 'adult' artistic approaches existed in local puppet animation.

So, it comes as no surprise that, in the Soviet times, almost every Estonian director of drawn animation wanted to make artistic films for adult audiences, if not right away then at least in the future. It was a question of artistic capability and prestige. As a result, the scripts of flat children's films were usually offered to junior directors, newcomers in the studio. The most interesting fruits of this policy were Priit Pärn's early works and, although he was able to propose his own scripts and stubbornly rejected other authors' texts, his first films can clearly be categorised as children's films. Also, Ando Keskküla (1950–2008), a hyperrealist painter who became regarded as one of the leaders of his generation of Estonian artists, only produced two quite experimental and openly pop-like animations in the mid-1970s, before leaving the field, most likely because the studio offered him the chance to direct another children's film (which Avo Paistik finally completed—the above-mentioned *Vacuum Cleaner* from 1978). A local hero of the Estonian avant-garde, Leonhard Lapin (b. 1947), made a brilliant pop art design together with his then-wife Sirje Lapin (now Runge; b. 1950) for one of Raamat's early films, *Colour-Bird (Värvilind)*, (1974), although this film was meant for children younger than five. So why should he have continued? It seems, in hindsight, that only Priit Pärn was strong or stubborn enough to withstand this kind of systematic downgrading and finally made his way from the initial status of a 'barbarian' (Ruus 1992: 38)—a fact publicly never

concealed was that Pärn was actually educated as a biologist, having no formal training in art at all—in the 1970s and early 1980s, to the honourable laureateship of the 'leader of the school of Estonian animation',¹⁹ as he is today quite often referred to.

However, innovations cannot be regarded as innovations unless they are set against a certain conservative background. Due to the stable quality of output from both of Tallinnfilm's animation divisions, some modest experimentation was allowed. Goskino received good children's puppet films from Tallinn beginning in the late 1950s, and two decades later, when Rein Raamat's painterly ambitions in film-making began to surface, it was most likely considered no more than a positive addition to the 'republican quota'. For Goskino, Estonian animation as a trademark had already been established. As early as the late 1970s, Estonians had acquired the 'reputation of Jupiter' in Goskino, which also helped to guarantee the later acceptance of Priit Pärn's talent (Ruus 2003). Among Soviet officials, the process of accepting Pärn's controversial works was, at the same time, painfully gradual but relatively quick, and only his perhaps most highly regarded film, his 'calling card' entitled *Luncheon on the Grass*, was not made possible until 1987²⁰—a time when Mikhail Gorbachev had already initiated his liberal economic reforms, best remembered by the catchy terms perestroika and glasnost. Jaan Ruus has pointed out that Pärn became an innovator in Soviet animation with his first films in the early 1980s (Ruus 1992: 38); yet it is also true that Raamat had already acquired a similar reputation himself with his third directorial work, *The Flight (Lend)*, (1973), which featured op-like artwork by the renowned Estonian painter Aili Vint (b. 1941). Without a doubt, this image of an innovator became extremely handy when Raamat started to direct his serious painterly films *The Hunter (Kütt)*, (1976), *Antennas in Ice (Antennid jääs)*, (1977) and the aforementioned works *Big Töll* and *Hell*, which earned him most of his reputation. As a consequence, cinema officials in Moscow most likely saw Estonian animators as slightly too independent and self-assured, but otherwise co-operative. It is precisely this balance between artistic experiment

and conservatism, between the risky projects of Tallinnfilm's drawn animation division and securing the tradition of Estonian puppet animation, that convinced Goskino to regard Estonian animation as a profitable phenomenon and therefore prompted it to keep Estonian animation's activities financed right up to the collapse of the Soviet system.

In conclusion, it is important to stress that the issue of Soviet film bureaucracy and censorship indeed played a crucial role in the 'imagological shift' which characterised the public image of Estonian animation in the 1980s and in the post-Soviet 1990s. Essential to the true process of elevating Priit Pärn's and, more disputably, also Rein Raamat's cinematic works from the marginal and 'low' status of animation (which was mostly oriented to small children) to a more prestigious level of Estonian 'high' culture (which was not corrupted or politically engaged) was, along with their artistic originality, the discourse of Soviet dissidence, which emerged as the Estonian film-makers' contacts with censorship became more frequent. Of course, it would be wrong to suggest here that Estonian animated films were 'devices of dissidence' or openly critical of the Soviet system, but some elements in some films indeed were quite on the edge—up to the then accepted limit, of course. Thus the 'political' element may not have lain in the shelving or censoring of a film, but in the bureaucratic system itself, which, as this paper hopefully has showed, evoked different acts of quasi-resistance and strategies of double-language simply in its way of functioning, its apparatus. Moreover, to gain 'political' reception, the films themselves did not have to be 'political' at all, because the mere fact of making them was a thoroughly political-ideological process and, with glasnost and perestroika, the public became increasingly aware of those creative constraints.

Discipline finally produces disobedience—any prison warden or schoolteacher would tell you that.²¹ Serious conflicts between film-makers and bureaucrats were rare, while semi-conflicts and quasi-compromises were quite common. Every totalitarian regime which seeks to repress its subjects paradoxically also

needs them to 'rebel' against it, because it is only during these 'rebellious' moments that the authorities really succeed and truly control. The slave has to know where the fence is; the prisoner has to know how long the chain is. Yet, with its exuberant and multi-layered system of control, Goskino actually guaranteed that Soviet film-makers became well-trained in bypassing the official ideology. And this is the place where official paperwork speaks one language and the real people speak another.

These conclusions might seem too simple, but this risk has to be taken. In a sense, perestroika and the liberal reforms of the mid-1980s only opened up the gate for something that had been there for quite some time already—a wave of discontent that ended as soon as the system which gave birth to it ended. Thus, the contemporary viewer should never ignore the historical context, the socio-political aspects of a Soviet film. If you ignore the system in which these films were made, you lose those fundamental factors, those 'between-the-lines' allusions and critiques of the system, which helped these films to become highly regarded in the first place. It is important to see that the bureaucratic rules in fact helped to turn film into art, yet paradoxically in another, officially unwanted, unintended way—by providing film-makers the impetus to rebel against the authorities rather than to submit. Ironically enough, the absurd and painfully critical storyline of Pärn's *Luncheon on the Grass* deals with no other issue than getting approval for a film proposal in Moscow.

Thus, the true relationship between Goskino and a small republican studio such as Tallinnfilm resembled a deranged mixture of symbiotic and parasitical organisms—and sometimes it is not easy to tell which part fed

19 See, for example, Kaugemaa 2002/2003: 28–33 or Tõnson 2006.

20 The stories and legends around (and above) the making of this film have been gathered and critically examined in at least one very good and comprehensive study. For more detail, see Laaniste 2006.

21 And I have refrained here from quoting once more that famous sentence by Michel Foucault: 'Where there is power, there is resistance', although I admit it would have served as a nice motto.

more off of the other. In the case of Tallinnfilm's drawn animation output of the 1980s, it seems that such parasitical and/or symbiotic relations could also co-exist quite naturally and produce extremely powerful landmarks in the Estonian cultural sphere, both before and after perestroika. In the end, it really comes as no surprise that Priit Pärn, the most internationally celebrated Estonian animator to date, said in an interview given in 1998 to *Animation World Magazine* that he considers the years 1986–1992 to be the golden years of Estonian animation. Why? 'We had the freedom to do what we wanted and Moscow paid for it all.'

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- Big Töll (Suur Töll)*, dir. Rein Raamat. Estonia, 1980
- Colour-Bird (Värvilind)*, dir. Rein Raamat. Estonia, 1974
- A Forest Tale (Metsamuinasjutt)*, dir. Elbert Tuganov. Estonia, 1960
- Hell (Põrgu)*, dir. Rein Raamat. Estonia, 1983
- The Hunter (Kütt)*, dir. Rein Raamat. Estonia, 1976
- Is the Earth Round? (Kas maakera on ümmargune?)*, dir. Priit Pärn. Estonia, 1977
- The Last Relic (Viimne reliikvia)*, dir. Grigori Kromanov. Estonia, 1969
- Luncheon on the Grass (Eine murul)*, dir. Priit Pärn. Estonia, 1987
- The Mirror (Зеркало)*, dir. Andrey Tarkovsky. Russia, 1975
- The New Old One of Põrgupõhja (Põrgupõhja uus Vanapagan)*, dir. Grigori Kromanov, Jüri Müür. Estonia, 1964
- The Northern Frog (Põhja konn)*, dir. Elbert Tuganov. Estonia, 1959
- Peter's Dream (Peetrikese unenägu)*, dir. Elbert Tuganov. Estonia, 1958
- Some Exercises in Preparation for Independent Life (Harjutusi iseseisvaks eluks)*, dir. Priit Pärn. Estonia, 1980
- Time Out (Aeg maha)*, dir. Priit Pärn. Estonia, 1984
- The Triangle (Kolmnurk)*, dir. Priit Pärn. Estonia, 1982
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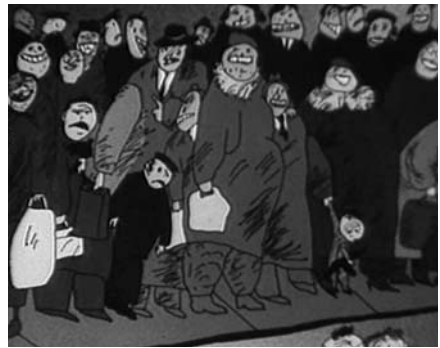
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