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**A View from  
the Periphery  
Spatial Discourse of  
the Soviet Estonian  
Feature Film:  
The 1940s and 1950s<sup>★</sup>**

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The first post-war decade and a half has more or less faded from the story of (Soviet) Estonian film-making; it forms a 'black hole' in the collective consciousness of the country's cinematic heritage, a little-known and alien gap between two 'owns': the thin, yet still our own, film culture of the pre-war Estonian Republic, and the much-celebrated rise of the 'national school of film' at the beginning of the 1960s. The late 1940s and the 1950s have rarely earned attention from today's critics and scholars, who tend to discard those years as a somewhat shameful period of blatant socialist realism (see, e.g., Orav 2003: 16–20). This paper, however, seeks to re-investigate the era's feature films from the perspective of spatial representations, considering how the cinematic depictions of spaces, places and people inhabiting them resonate with ideological shifts and Soviet strategies of identity-building. This essay begins with a short overview of the situation the local film industry faced in the second half of the 1940s, then moves on to argue that the spatial discourse of the Soviet Estonian films of the post-war decade and a half was, to a large extent, governed by the categories characteristic of the Stalinist/socialist realist culture and imported by Russian film-makers. The spatial representations were mainly based on the notions of the 'tourist gaze', the conquest of territory, binary spatial patterns (above all, centre versus periphery), and closed and static 'sacralised' space.

## THE (NEW) BEGINNING

The beginning of Soviet Estonian feature films occurred in 1947, when *Life in the Citadel* (*Elutsitadellis*), an adaptation of a play by the Estonian writer August Jakobson, was produced. By that time, the war and the Soviet cultural policy had effectively annihilated the better part of the local pre-war film world, both technically and creatively. The equipment, still intact and fully meeting the standards of modern film-making in the summer of 1940, had been destroyed (Pärnapuu 1989: 38), and a fair share of the film-makers, producers and industry officials of the Estonian Republic had emigrated, had been deported, or just discarded from the

industry.<sup>1</sup> According to Decree no. 281, issued by the Council of Peoples Commissars of the Estonian SSR, the Tallinn Studio of Newsreels (Kinokroonika Tallinna Stuudio)<sup>2</sup>—initially barely smouldering in the ashes of Estonian Culture Film (Eesti Kultuurfilm)—was officially established on March 19, 1945 (Paas 2002: 70). Although certain threads still inevitably connected the new era with the old Republic, the purification of the system, both intentional and ancillary (i.e. war-related), was destined to serve a particular goal: to turn a completely new page in the cinema of the now-occupied Soviet Estonia. The new cinematic culture was established 'as a transplant', which, arguably, for decades to come had very little to do with the organism of the local cultural life, as Lenart Meri noted in his ground-breaking article 'The great loner' ('Suur üksiklane') in 1968. It was a battle on multiple fronts: together with new cameras and editing tables, first borrowed and then bought, as well as with the new aesthetics of socialist realism, a knowledge was imported and propagated, which spread fairly aggressively the idea that film-making was born here only due to the favourable conditions brought by the Soviet regime, and anyone declaring the opposite was a 'bourgeois slanderer'. 'Cinematic troops', initially consisting of relatively well-established directors, cinematographers and scriptwriters, were sent to the new republics, which had to plant the seed of the ideologically correct and technically

1 In a very similar vein to, for example, Polish post-war film culture (see Haltof 2002: 47ff), where many film professionals also had lost their lives at the hands of the Nazis (Hendrykowska 1996: 389). In Estonia, the most famous case is probably that of Konstantin Märška, a celebrated cinematographer who shot several feature films in the 1920s and became the main newsreel-maker of the state-owned Estonian Culture Film studio in the 1930s. He was undoubtedly one of the best film-makers of the pre-war period and, although he served as an assistant cinematographer in the crew of *Life in the Citadel*, Soviet officials made sure that his talents but also, even more importantly, his undesirable past would have minimal influence on the new Soviet Estonian cinematography. Märška died in 1951.

2 The studio carried different names during the Soviet period: from 1944 to 1954 it was called Kinokroonika Tallinna Stuudio (Tallinn Studio of Newsreels), and in 1954 it was renamed Tallinna Kunstiliste ja Kroonikafilme Kinostuudio (Tallinn Studio of Feature Films and Newsreels), or, in short Tallinna Kinostuudio (Tallinn Film Studio). Finally, in 1961 it became Tallinnfilm.

impeccable Soviet film.<sup>3</sup> On the surface, the establishment of small and clearly not cost-effective national studios was perhaps meaningless, but they were an important part of the ‘great Stalinist national politics’. Thus, Yuli Raizman went to Latvia (*Rainis*, 1949), Vera Stroyeva directed *Marite* in Lithuania, and, among others, Leonid Trauberg and Herbert Rappaport came to Estonia. Rappaport, who had studied law in Vienna in the 1920s, made films in Germany, France and the US in the 1920s and 1930s and finally, in 1936, had settled in Leningrad, directed a total of four films in Estonia: *Life in the Citadel*, *Light in Koordi* (*Valgus Koordis*, 1951), *Andrus Finds Happiness* (*Andrus õnn*, 1955) and *In Rain and Sunshine* (*Vihmas ja päikeses*, 1960). The first three actually bore Lenfilm’s ‘trademark’, a fact which later caused quite a controversy over whether they belonged to the Estonian cultural sphere at all. However, in my opinion, these films, presented in the Estonian language, with Estonian actors, set in local surroundings and based, at least partially, on Estonian literary works, although directed by Soviet film-makers who, in fact, were supported by second directors from Estonian theatres (e.g. Andres Särev and Epp Kaidu, and later Kaljo Kiisk), should be considered at least as Soviet Estonian works. If not for any other reason, then maybe only because nobody else claims them.

One has to admit that Rappaport and Lenfilm, indeed, introduced an entirely new level of professionalism to the Estonian film industry, which for various (economic) reasons<sup>4</sup> had produced only a few feature films during the pre-war years of the Estonian Republic (see, e.g., Paas 1980). This positive influence, however, was almost completely annulled by the fact that, for an extended period of time, the local creative potential was almost entirely ignored (see, e.g., Kaidu 1956: 194–195) and thus, from the mid-1950s, when feature film production in Tallinn was launched, until the early 1960s, the look and artistic level of the local production was mainly shaped by ‘the infamous unemployed of the *malokartini*’<sup>5</sup>—mediocre Russian film-makers with ‘low creative potential’ (Elmanovič 1987) who raided the new national studios because they could

not find work in larger central studios. The personal reasons for relocating to the western rim of the Soviet Union, sometimes referred to as the ‘West of the East’, certainly varied (from finding a better place to live and/or seeking more favourable career conditions to escaping the misfortunes of one’s private life), but the main programmatic, prudent and practical objective of engaging them in the process of establishing these new national studios was ‘to indoctrinate a specific stereotyped outlook on life, to link the new national cinematography in making with the network of the all-Union cinematic legislation, and—undeniably—to block the much-feared influence of the so-called bourgeois nationalists.’ (Elmanovič 1987.) In the late 1950s, however, a number of young Estonian film-makers graduated, one by one, from the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (Всесоюзный государственный институт кинематографии, VGIK) in Moscow,<sup>6</sup> and started their highly promising careers in Tallinn. Also, several local writers joined the staff of the studio, both as scriptwriters and as members of the studio’s Artistic Council. Thus, a more experienced and better-trained body of film-makers was established step by step. In addition, the Stalinist era, which had threatened people with physical repression, was gradually replaced by the Khrushchev ‘Thaw’, creating more encouraging conditions for self-expression. The sum of these circumstances was the emergence of a clearly discernible struggle between two generations and ideologies (Stalinism versus the Thaw), which inevitably resulted in an increasingly acute conflict between the (older) ‘visiting film-makers’, who propagated an unsolicited and inapt style of film-making, and the (young) Estonian film-makers, who now dared to stand for local cultural and moral values. The transcripts of the studio’s Artistic Council, inaccessible outside of the relatively small circle of insiders, and—more importantly—some articles published in the public media (e.g. Kaidu 1956: 198–199), attest to rather open attacks and accusations against the inadequate creative potential of these ‘touring’ Russian film-makers, and also, perhaps even more significantly, against their ignorance of the local language, art and literature. This shift,

however, cannot be observed in the actual production until about 1962, when an apparent break occurred, marked by a film with an eloquent title—*Ice-Drift (Jääminek)*. The thaw in filmic affairs was also marked by a completely new agent in the arena of film production: in 1960, Estonian Television produced its very first feature film, *Joller the Actor (Näitleja Joller)*—the first recognisably Estonian feature film of the post-war years, as Lennart Meri has argued (Meri 1968).

## FILM FORM

As argued above, until the early 1960s the Soviet Estonian feature film was dominated by the cinematic language and patterns of narration imported from the large Russian central studios. This line of ‘realism’, based mainly on the principles of continuity editing (Bordwell 2001: 20) and other cinematic devices aimed at narrative clarity and the ‘effect of realism’, was derived from the classical Hollywood studio style and was simultaneously shaped to a considerable extent to suit Stalin’s personal tastes. Peter Kenez has maintained that, although he thoroughly enjoyed watching films, Stalin could never understand the essence of this medium. He far preferred the spoken word to the visual dimension of film-making. In terms of films, his taste was extremely unadventurous: experimental cinematography, odd and/or sharp camera angles, and tilted frames had to be discarded, and the camera had to shoot from eye-level (Kenez 2001: 131). Instead of close-ups, medium and long shots were favoured, ‘encompassing the entire environment, as if camera could, simply by avoiding selection, offer images saturated with reality’ (Woll 2000: 27). Theatrical aesthetics were mainly based on ‘in-depth staging and long takes – “Wellsian” depth became a hallmark of Stalinist cinema through the 1940s and 1950s.’ (Bordwell 2005: 111.) André Bazin has argued that in-depth staging and depth of focus ‘brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality. Therefore it is correct to say that, independently of the contents of the image, its structure is more realistic’ (Bazin 1967: 35). Thus, it is not difficult to understand

why this device was so crucial to socialist realist aesthetics, which sought to present blatantly illusionist films as true reflections of reality. In Soviet Estonian films, in-depth staging (sometimes combined with depth-of-focus cinematography) is a frequent feature occurring in both indoor and outdoor settings.

However, after Stalin’s death in 1953, the rigour of this manner of representation was broken down, to a degree, and a few cautious steps

3 In the same way, Soviet (Russian) film-makers were sent as ‘ideological watchdogs’ to more distant countries of the Soviet bloc (e.g. Vsevolod Pudovkin acted as the ‘Soviet film ‘policeman’ (Cunningham 2004: 70–71) in Hungary, visiting the country twice in 1950–1951; in 1947–1948 Ilya Trauberg served on the board of directors of the East German film company DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft; see Allan 1999: 4, 6)) and the missions of film-makers such as Abram Room and Sergei Yutkevitch to Albania and Yugoslavia, respectively, resulted in Soviet-Albanian/Yugoslavian co-productions (many thanks to Dina Jordanova for pointing out this fact). In East Germany, on the other hand, the Soviets worked with German intellectuals on a more equal and co-operative basis, above all with people—usually German émigrés in the USSR—who had already been involved in such partnerships for quite some time (see, e.g., Mückenberger 1999: 60). The practice of co-productions remained an important aspect of film-making in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc throughout the socialist period, serving the significant ideological task of bringing the socialist nations together into a common ‘big family’.

4 In the pre-war Estonian Republic, the local market was minuscule and state agencies did not support (feature) film-making substantially; at the same time, in other small European countries this was an essential part of the development of their respective national film cultures and of their success both in local and international markets. True, from 1931 the state film studio Estonian Culture Film was established and in 1936 it became an organ of state propaganda, producing ‘compulsory newsreels that propagated values established by the state, and benevolent educational films.’ (Ruus s.a.) Film-related legislation was absent until 1935. There was no film school and professional training was lacking altogether. One of the most productive feature film directors, Theodor Luts, left Estonia in the 1930s, heading first to Finland, then to Sweden and later, after the end of World War II, to Brazil.

5 In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the number of (feature) films made in the Soviet Union decreased radically, mainly due to repressive cultural politics but also owing to Stalin’s policy of allowing the making of only a very limited number of films, all of which had to be masterpieces (see, e.g., Elmanovits 1987). Between 1945 and 1953, the production of all the studios of the Union came to 185 films and the absolute low-point was hit in 1951, with only nine films made in total (Woll 2000: 4). Furthermore, many of them were only ‘unfilmic’ recordings of theatrical performances (Kenez 2001: 188; Liehm, Liehm 1977: 68).

6 For the admission of students from the smaller republics, a quota of places had been created in order to ensure their training by the highest standards possible and to guarantee a high level of professionalism throughout the Soviet film industry—undeniably yet another way of firmly integrating the new republican cinemas into the bloodstream of pan-Soviet culture.

were taken towards moderate formal innovation. These are characterised mainly by the use of sharper angles and more expressive viewpoints, by a larger number of close-ups and even by some (rather restrained) attempts to break up the narrative linearity. For instance, the poetic shots of yachts at sea in *Yachts at Sea* (*Jahid merel*, 1955) are clearly influenced by Eisensteinian visual rhythms (cf. the visual patterns created by sails at the beginning of the Odessa staircase sequence from his *Battleship Potemkin* (*Броненосец Потёмкин*, 1925)), which in this case, unsurprisingly, were not invested with a similar level of thought and remained mainly ornamental. The low-angle shots of a coastal lighthouse in the same film, on a couple of occasions composed as almost abstract silhouette-pictures, were eye-catching but merely decorative. On the visual side, additionally, in the last sequence of the *Underwater Reefs* (*Veealusel karid*, 1959), the subjective camera-work simulating the drunken gait of the protagonist also exemplifies the amplification of the scale of cinematic devices. These pictorial shifts were complemented by innovations on the temporal axis: the film *The Turning Point* (*Pöördel*, 1957) is presented in the form of frame narration; the narrative fabric of *June Days* (*Juunikuu päevad*, 1957) is interwoven with numerous flashbacks (both as brief dissolves and lengthy passages); and *Underwater Reefs* includes both visual and sound flashbacks.

The modest creative edge, however, did not allow too much of a rise above the minimal professional standards, and even these few innovations were not appreciated by the public, whose main attention was caught by the trite and stereotyped socialist realist stories and unrealistic plots.

#### TOURIST GAZE I: THE LANDSCAPE

Emma Widdis has, in her study *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (2003), described the shift of paradigm in the Soviet cinema which took place at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s. She argues that cinema based on the dogmas of socialist

realism brought along a new approach to the representation of landscape: the avant-garde, decentralised, fragmented, adventurous spatial experience, quintessentially represented in the film made in 1929 by Dziga Vertov—*The Man with the Movie Camera* (*Человек с киноаппаратом*)—was replaced by a static, hierarchical, tamed and reified view of the landscape. This, she says, refers to the emergence of the ‘tourist gaze’.<sup>7</sup> The exploration of the land characteristic of the early Soviet spatial discourse was replaced by the conquest (*освоение* in Russian<sup>8</sup>) of territories, travel as exploration was gradually substituted for travel as leisure, or tourism, and the periphery was transformed ‘from a space of experience into a decorative space, implicitly viewed from the centre’ (Widdis 2003b: 139–140).

Epp Kaidu, the second director of Rappaport’s *Light in Koordi* and *Andrus Finds Happiness*, wrote in 1956:

If we ... experience the life of our nation only as tourists, we shall end up either with cheap artificial exoticism or museum-like archaism that distorts today’s realities. It is impossible to comprehend and value a nation’s soul if one is not aware of the treasures held in its museums. However, it is also impossible to choose from the museum what is necessary in one case or another if one does not know thoroughly and many-sidedly the life of this nation. (Kaidu 1956: 198.)

Ten years later, in 1966, the Estonian film critic Ivar Kosenkranius responded to the question ‘How has Estonian cinema developed?’ as follows:

These films [of the 1950s] represented the contemporary times, but the modern era was depicted on the screen as a thematic field trip to a fishing kolkhoz, to a construction site of an electric power plant or to the world of athletes. The film-makers showed contemporary Soviet Estonia in the manner of a fashion show, according to the subject of the particular film. (Kosenkranius 1974: 85.)

These quotations reveal, if one leaves aside the inescapable ‘compulsory self-criticism’ distinctive to the progress-driven rhetoric of the time, the rather truthful realisation that the spatial configurations of the Soviet Estonian films of the 1950s were indeed characterised by a sense of touristic distance, a perception of space detached from real, experiential circumstances of existence, which, of course, was, by the authors of these critiques—at least to an extent—motivated by the fact that the films were made by ‘directors and cinematographers who were [not] familiar with local life and conditions’ (Kaidu 1956: 198). Would things have been different if, in the same institutional and ideological framework, the cameras and cutting scissors were held by local talent? A parallel example from the Soviet Estonian literature of the same period seems to indicate that this might not have been the case (see, e.g., Märka 1998). This suggests that the socialist realist paradigm was, to an extent, ‘touristic’ in its essence and, even if put into practice by native inhabitants who presumably had a more profound and closer relationship with their (cultural) surroundings, its fundamental alienation would still have been insurmountable.

Close analysis of the actual films of the era shows that Widdis’s observation on the tamed, frozen and reified spatial matrix of socialist realist art finds a solid basis in the feature films of 1950s Soviet Estonia. This is perhaps most evident in regard to rural spaces, where nature, living and active, was often ‘turned into landscape’, into a passive horizon, a mere background for action (Widdis 2003b: 185–186; Bakhtin 2004: 217, 144). The genuinely Stalinist *Light in Koordi* and practically all the later films of the decade systematically repeat radiant and picturesque views of landscape: the hilly southern Estonian countryside (*Light in Koordi*), the stretches of seaside settings of the western coast and the islands (*Underwater Reefs* and *Yachts at Sea*) and carefully guarded border waters (*Yachts at Sea*), or even the golden expanses of fertile Ukrainian grain fields (again *Light in Koordi*). This operation of taming nature, ever changing, versatile and full of interruptions, into predictable, picture-postcard-pretty and almost always bright and

sun-drenched views is only one of the milder forms of socialist realist spatial transformations. Occasionally, nature—or, to be more precise, landscape—even becomes an object of a more or less repressive, reifying subjugation. This subjugation is exemplified, for instance, by scenes of ploughing fields in *Light in Koordi*, where machines penetrate the grain-growing soil or reclaim the bogs. Similarly, the yachtsmen in *Yachts at Sea* master the stormy sea with playful ease. The tempest in *Underwater Reefs* seems more threatening, but is still overcome without too much effort by the experienced fishermen, and its true, elemental severity is further undermined by the fact that its primary function in the film is to signify the inner struggles of the protagonist going astray. These pictures of (Soviet) people triumphing over or taming the (Estonian) wilderness could not be more eloquent in suggesting the newly established cultural hierarchies and power relations.

Another aspect of the tourist gaze and the decisive rupture it creates between everyday practices and the representations of space is the process of so-called ‘museumisation’ (Relph 1976: 80): the detachment of various objects from their actual and/or traditional daily functions, turning them into a lifeless, exotic exhibition. In the films of the 1950s, this becomes most obvious in the case of (pseudo-)ethnographic paraphernalia, such as old knitting

7 The term ‘tourist gaze’, coined by the British sociologist John Urry, is not only connected to sight-seers’ curious glance but has—largely due to phenomenological theories—come to signify a kind of universal mode of perception, which, according to many commentators, has since the mid-20th century started to dominate the ways people relate themselves to their surroundings (Urry 1990: 82). For instance, the Canadian geographer Edward Relph argues that the touristic perception of place is characterised by an inauthentic and false relationship between human and environment, based on uncritical adoption of predetermined conceptions; the opposite is a relationship that is deep, immediate and genuine (Relph 1976: 80–87).

8 More precisely, ‘conquest’ is only one of several possible translations (e.g. *освоение космоса*, ‘conquest of outer space’); more commonly, *освоение* is translated as ‘reclamation’, ‘mastering’ or ‘assimilation’, but also ‘development’, ‘pioneering’ or ‘settling’. I am grateful to Irina Novikova for directing my attention to this. However, all these words still convey Widdis’s basic idea of substituting the dynamic process of exploration with spatial practices aimed at domesticating the unknown and/or cancelling the unwanted.

patterns, folk costumes and traditional beer mugs. These items were torn out of their genuine and local cultural and social background and invested with the purposefully international, yet entirely hollow, concept of 'national form, socialist content'. They were turned into 'interesting aesthetic objects', without any true 'political or social connotations' (Tunbridge, Ashworth 1995: 48)—or, to be more precise, their previous political and social connotations were left aside and replaced by those corresponding to Soviet national politics and controlled by Soviet authorities. Thus, the production of meaning became the monopoly of the Soviet invaders and, by their will, these exotic ethnographic items started to signify the 'successes' of the small Estonian nation in the 'great family of Soviet peoples', which, from a Soviet perspective, would have, ultimately, meant the total annihilation<sup>9</sup> of Estonian culture and society.

## TOURIST GAZE II: THE CITYSCAPE

In films set in urban environments, the tourist gaze finds expression mainly through the construction of an illusionist, escapist and selective wishful reality, distanced from everyday practices on both environmental and social levels. Coherent urban space is fragmented into detached views, into slices of space which often concentrate around various monuments established by the state, based on approved ideological tenets and conveying officially accepted collective identities. For instance, in *Andrus Finds Happiness*, the first post-war Soviet Estonian feature film displaying the centre of Tallinn, the Russalka monument functions as an important marker of the city's identity as a Soviet coastal town.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the lively urban tissue is mapped as a monumental space of frozen picture-postcard-like views. Tallinn's medieval Old Town, and the surrounding modern centre, mainly built during the times of the pre-war Republic, are appropriated smoothly and integrated into the presentable socialist realist spatial matrix. In a number of films of the second half of the 1950s, the Old Town and the modern centre are depicted as 'progressive' examples of the 'Soviet West'. The tourist gaze is suggested

either through representation of certain views and/or buildings (such as the city's silhouette or the medieval Town Hall), which later became a staple in the visual marketing of Tallinn as a desirable tourist destination, or through formal devices, such as establishing shots with a camera panning over the picturesque landscape of the roofs of the Tallinn Old Town, implying a 'master gaze', controlling and mapping the environment, suggesting order, and reifying the depicted surroundings (e.g. *June Days* or *Uninvited Guests* (*Kutsumata külalised*, 1959)). Although the heyday of the cinematic 'Tallinn for tourists' was still to come in the late 1960s and early 1970s,<sup>11</sup> when the Soviet administration, struggling with increasing hard-currency debt, discovered tourism (and, in this respect, Tallinn, among many other cities) as a good source of foreign currency (Hall 1991: 81), the film *Mischievous Curves* (*Vallatud kurvid*, 1959), a light comedy about motor-cyclists and, above all, about the confusion created by a pair of charming twins, can be seen as the first example of this 'genre'. In this film, Old Thomas—the soldier-shaped weathervane of the old Town Hall—also makes his first appearance. Later he became the ultimate symbol of Tallinn as a tourism destination and, somewhat paradoxically, even a sort of agent of resistance in the popular mind of Estonians. Notably, Tallinnfilm produced the feature-length musical *Old Thomas Was Stolen* (*Varastati Vana Toomas*) in 1971.

The slums and dilapidated corners—if shown at all—demonstrate, without exception, the hardships of bourgeois history; they only appear in films about the destitution, misery and humiliation of the working class life during the pre-war years of 'predatory capitalism'. For example, a 'film-play'<sup>12</sup> from 1957, *In the Back Yard* (*Tagahoovis*, 1957), based on a story by the much-celebrated Estonian writer Oskar Luts, is set almost entirely in a back area of a ramshackle slum; it depicts the life of the working class during the Great Depression of the early 1930s. Or *The Männards* (*Perekond Männard*, 1960), a film about the life of a poor working class family in the years between 1918, the establishment of the first Republic, and 1924, the year of the infamous (although

unsuccessful) communist coup in Tallinn; the family resides in a cramped apartment in a shabby wooden rental house situated on a narrow, cobblestone street. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, showing the old wooden districts was completely prohibited in films.<sup>13</sup>

### TOURIST GAZE III: HYGIENE

A further trait of the touristic spatial protocol is cleanliness. Not only was nature turned into a 'view' and everyday items into a museumised exhibit, people's everyday activities, especially those of all kinds of manual labourers (above all, farmers and fishermen, blue-collar factory employees etc.) also became a gleaming spectacle. David Caute explains in his study *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War*:

Everyone in a [Stalin era] Soviet film— strikers, peasants, railway workers— is sheathed in what might be described a Mosfilm-set cleanliness; even the buildings of a post-war European city show no trace of destruction, debris, dust, destitution. No patched clothes here, no ration cards, no queues. Soviet designers and costume departments were in desperate denial of reality—the drabness of life in the Soviet Union ... had to be suppressed. This 'spring-clean' colouration set Soviet cinematography closer to Disney than to Italian neo-realism. (Caute 2003: 149.)

In Soviet Estonian films, this is perhaps most evident in two films: *Light in Koordi* and *Andrus Finds Happiness*, both shot on colour film stock and characterised by an exceptionally vivid pictorial language. Farmsteads in *Light in Koordi* are well-groomed and tidy, bearing no signs of war-time hardships (although the film starts in September 1944, as the title at the beginning states); even the quarters of the poor are neat, not to mention the bluish-whitish clinical spotlessness of the hospital. The rosy and well-nourished farmers, although dressed 'rurally', are clothed in clean and unpatched outfits, and the soldiers returning home from

the war wear brand new uniforms. Even the old and outdated modes of farming, although clearly time-consuming and laborious (which, of course, had to be replaced by the collective work and machine-power of a kolkhoz), do not seem much more difficult than a healthy and refreshing workout in fresh air. Still, the Estonian

9 Evgeny Dobrenko indeed argues that 'museumification' 'acts as one form of destruction' (Dobrenko 2008: 9) of the 'living past'. True, he refers to the real museums of Stalinist Russia in the framework of the production of history or, more precisely, of 'images of the past', yet his discussion applies just as well to the analysis at hand, for the intended ultimate result of this 'museumisation' was precisely another 'form of destruction', the destruction of Estonia's national past and identity.

10 The monument was erected in 1902 in memory of a Russian armoured ship which sank on its way from Tallinn to Helsinki in 1893. Although established under the tsarist regime, it still referred to the Russian and, by association, Soviet identity. (In fact, an important feature of the self-image of the post-war Stalinist regime was the realisation that the Soviet Union was the 'worthy heir' of 'Russian imperial grandeur'; see Dobrenko 2008: 136.) Significantly, up until now it has been customary for Russian newly-weds to visit the monument as part of their wedding ceremony. Naturally, it is entirely likely that in the film the monument also expressed the failure of the protagonist's dream of going to a naval school. Nevertheless, it is important that this particular monument was chosen amongst all other possible sites to convey this idea (virtually any seaside spot would have served the goal just as well). The selection of this particular monument also signifies the fact that in the Soviet spatial-political imagination the Baltic states had always been an integral part of Russian/Soviet territory and their annexation during World War II was an act of reclaiming that territory, of '(re)domesticating' the border-area, as suggested by Irina Novikova (personal communication with Irina Novikova, January 30, 2008).

11 About the representations of the Tallinn Old Town in Soviet Estonian films see Närpea 2004 and Närpea 2005.

12 'Film-plays' offered an effective opportunity to fulfil pre-set production plans in the early 1950s, during the period of *malokartinie*, and often they were nothing more than recordings of theatrical plays, shot with a static camera placed in front of the stage. (*In the Back Yard* is a more sophisticated case, however, as it was shot partly on location in an old residential area in Tallinn and elsewhere, and partly on a studio set. Nevertheless, the overall feeling is somewhat cramped and the sense of theatricality is reinforced by 'stagy' dialogue and acting.) At the same time, in Russia, film-plays supported the programmatic campaign of 'cultivation' (or, literally, the pursuit of 'culture') of the Soviet society, launched in the post-war period and mainly targeted at Russian illiterate peasants (see, e.g., Clark 2000: 195ff)— these film-plays were supposed to make high-quality theatre available to masses inhabiting the provinces. A somewhat legend-like statement proposes that film-plays were made because of Stalin, who was a keen theatre-lover but dreaded visiting public places (Liehm, Liehm 1977: 68).

13 The wooden residential districts made their first appearance as a contemporary everyday setting only in 1978, in Arvo Krusem's drama *Woman Heats the Sauna (Naine kütab sauna)*.

countryside is depicted as lagging far behind the Russian kolkhozes: while the farmers of the former inhabit greyish log cabins, the latter's stone houses are covered with white plaster; more importantly, the film argues blatantly that Estonian villages lacked electricity, clubhouses and radios—an arrogant lie, of course, which, on the other hand, together with other elements of the film's *mise-en-scène*, indicate the general process of 'embourgeoisement' of the post-war Soviet society and ideology, as observed by Vera Dunham (1976: 42), or the 'veneration for "culture" [which] superseded the [previous] cult of heroic', as argued by Katerina Clark (2000: 195).

Although the overtly spectacular *mise-en-scène* of *Lights in Koordi* is unrivalled by later films, the embellishment of (working) environments remained a staple of socialist realist representations. This is apparent, for example, in *Yachts at Sea* and *Underwater Reefs*, where the representation of fishermen and their coastal villages stands in flagrant contradiction to actual coastal life. This becomes especially obvious when one compares these films with the pre-war short documentary *Fishermen (Kalurid)*. Although in 1936, when the documentary was shot, the political-ideological circumstances already favoured propagandistic representations, it is clearly more true to life. Furthermore, even a member of the studio's Artistic Council, the Estonian writer Aadu Hint, lamented the air-brushed reality in *Underwater Reefs*, remarking that 'We looked for a village for location shooting. What did we see? The coastal villages were in decay... The fishermen drank a lot.'<sup>14</sup>

On the one hand, the concept of hygiene was an integral part of the modernist cognition, surrounded by the progressive aura of sailing towards a better, easier and healthier life; on the other hand, in the context of one of the most gloomy chapters of Soviet and Estonian history—the mass purges, an ultimate act of purification—the notions of purity and purification gain a sinister flavour, casting a grave shadow on the Disney-Technicolor-like cinematic representations of the Stalinist age. The poverty of the post-war years, cities bombed to ruins, villages barely surviving after the campaigns of forced collectivisation—all of this, strangely, is

somehow perversely reflected, in these utterly out-of-this-world films, as a sort of external, yet inescapably integral contextual knowledge, turning the offensively naïve optimism characteristic of these films against them—into a grotesque dance of death on the graves. The final episode from *Light in Koordi* offers a vivid example: the demonstration of great agricultural accomplishments brought on by the establishment of a kolkhoz is followed by a feast at the new centre of the village. The people, dressed in colourful national costumes, sing and dance around a newly-built fountain—an audaciously excessive crowning of socialist progress. Simultaneously, the accompanying song informs the viewers of the 'future' of all the central characters: the farm-hands become the masters, the blind gain their sight, and the exploited poor develop into rosy-cheeked collective farmers. Over the joyous scene towers an enormous picture of Stalin, suggesting, of course, his profound and immediate involvement in the creation of this new society.<sup>15</sup>

#### THE CONQUEST OF TERRITORIES

The concept of conquest analysed by Emma Widdis (e.g. 2003a and 2003b), as well as the notions of purity and purification, resonate not only with the tactics of the tourist gaze, controlling, reifying and thus sanitising the landscapes, but also with the gigantic Stalinist projects of rearranging nature and rural territories: re-designing Russian villages, inverting the course of rivers in Central Asia and Siberia, drying out the Aral Sea and irrigating deserts. In Soviet Estonian feature films, these ideas, shrunk to a smaller scale in order to fit the local circumstances, take the shape of draining marshes (Elmanoviš 1988: 59). First of all, this can be seen as another act of purification, of getting rid of dirty and barren wastelands in order to increase the amount of fertile soil. But, crucially, it comes to signify the act of transforming the unknown, turning 'the wild into the safe', of domesticating the alien and potentially dangerous terrain (Widdis 2000: 410). For instance, in *Life in the Citadel*, the protagonist, the Einstein look-a-like Prof. Miilas, who, by the way, was—

equally tellingly—a linguist researching ‘dead languages’ in Jakobson’s very successful play, became a lichenologist on the silver screen. The goal of his life-long work and ultimate focus of his professional dreams—draining the marshes—is, in fact, a reincarnation on a smaller scale of the colossal Stalinist plans of aggressively penetrating not only the natural habitats of the newly conquered territories, but also the lives and minds of people inhabiting them. In the final episode, the solitary professor, who heretofore has eagerly protected the privacy of his estate, family and—perhaps most importantly—his intellectual activities from the invasion of any social or political agenda, opens up his citadel—and his mind—to the ‘obvious advantages’ of the Communist regime. He opens the curtains and the window of his stuffy office, looks at the boggy landscape and turns to his son, who has just joined the Red Army, saying: ‘That is, I will fight, too. And in the future we will step to this window again and see fields and gardens and blooming roses and golden grain. And for all my fellow-countrymen who want to work, enough land can be found—living, warm, generous.’ With these final spirited words, a heroic image of flourishing golden fields illuminated by bright sunshine appears on screen instead of the ailing vegetation of marshes. The next film, *Light in Koordi*, preaching the ‘urgent need’ of collectivisation, seems like a sequel to this ending, especially the triumphant closing scene, where hundreds of people and mighty machines drain the marshes near the fictional Koordi village. It is the ‘Snake Swamp’. In the film’s semantic framework, this significant metaphor of reclaiming fertile soil from the bog refers not only to the ‘great achievements’ of socialist agriculture (in reality, the situation was rather the opposite—the forced collectivisation nearly annihilated Estonian rural ecosystems), but also indicates that Estonia—the ailing periphery—has to be conquered by the Soviet powers, and Estonians—stubbornly following the futureless road of the capitalist system—have to be directed onto a more ‘prolific’, i.e. socialist, track.<sup>16</sup> Koordi’s Snake Swamp, as well as the name of the railway station appearing in the film—Swamp Village—has a clearly negative connotation in the film, connected to

the old, bourgeois Republic. Likewise, ‘swamp birds’ is the term the party organiser of the village uses to refer to the Estonian partisans—the Forest Brethren—hiding in the woods. The conclusion is simple and straightforward: once the marshes and the swamp birds are gone, the new regime will have won. The snakes will disappear with the swamp. Cleansing the landscape of bogs, then, signifies purging it of any unwanted people, mentalities and (cultural) phenomena, and consequently conquering it in its entirety. These imperialistic ambitions resemble the struggle of the English in their conquest of Ireland during the era of Enlightenment when, according to Katie Trumpener,<sup>17</sup> the Irish bogs were ‘an actual barrier to’ the English invaders and the reclamation of marshes became an important part of the subjugation of the Irish to English rule (see Trumpener 1997: 37–66).

#### CENTRE AND PERIPHERY

The notion of conquest is tightly connected with the relationship between centre and periphery characteristic of the Stalinist culture: after all, the Stalinist spatial program was, as maintained by Emma Widdis, organised around the dominant centre in Moscow, which extended radial lines of influence and can as such be interpreted as a ‘version of Foucault’s panoptic model of the organisation of power, in which a radial structure creates conditions of visibility that secure control from the center.’ (Widdis 2003a: 221.) According to Katerina Clark, the hierarchical relationship, the opposition between the centre and the periphery, translated to the vertical axis, defines the deep structure of socialist realist

14 Estonian State Archives (Eesti Riigiarhiiv), f. R-1707, n. 1, s. 123, l. 151.

15 The fact that the film, but especially this scene, was utterly abominable to the Estonian public even expressed itself in public media, where a brave critic had the courage to reprove it, to some extent, by condemning the scene as ‘relatively theatrical’ (Tigane 1951).

16 One of the contemporary reviewers triumphantly remarked that ‘the rusty waters of the Snake Swamp, once a hopeless adversary of the poor peasantry of Koordi, is now forced to yield to the storm of collective work and the mighty Soviet technology.’ ([Anonymous] 1950.)

17 I thank Katie Trumpener for pointing out this parallel.

literature. She states that the centre and the periphery constitute two totally different space-times that are 'maximally cut off from each other': the centre is a completely sacred space, while the periphery gradually becomes more profane towards the edges. The centre, the seat of power, is an exclusive shrine for the state leader; the periphery belongs to the masses. This is the reason, according to Katerina Clark, why socialist realist novels are predominantly set in the provinces (Clark 2003: 10–14). Apparently, cinema followed largely the same, or at least similar, principles. In Soviet Estonian feature films of the 1950s, the stories often take place in (peripheral) small towns, suburbs or in some other small or spatially confined settings. It seems a programmatic decision that the films produced while Stalin was still alive marginalised or avoided Tallinn altogether. Although some sequences of *Life in the Citadel* were indeed shot in the centre of Tallinn, the dominant reference is still the anonymous 'small Estonian town' (as the subtitles declare in the opening sequence); the shots of Tallinn also avoid the clearly recognisable, 'iconic objects' of the city. Perhaps this reflects the way the new regime sought to abolish the old system and establish its own (spatial) hierarchies. In fact, this is exactly what happens in *Life in the Citadel*: Tallinn is referred to as a clearly German or at least German-oriented town, especially in the scene where the old streets lined with high gabled façades are juxtaposed with the procession of Soviet troops—tanks and cavalry—penetrating these streets triumphantly after their victory over the German army and the 'liberation' of Tallinn.

The preference for rural settings during the Stalinist age could, perhaps, also have been motivated by the fact that Soviet ideologists undoubtedly understood that the stronghold of the national sentiment was the countryside, where the 'blood ties' connected the farmers with the land, stimulating their bourgeois-patriotic mentality, and not the cities, where the war and the waves of emigration had already weakened the former elite. Cinema—a means of mass communication with a high propaganda index—was used as one of the strategic devices in the conquest of new territories and in breaking

traditional ways of life. In Estonia, the urbanisation process had started at the turn of the century and was well under way in the 1920s and 1930s, but it reached entirely new dimensions (both in terms of physical amplitude and ideological significance) in the Soviet period. Over time, the national mythology associated industrialised urban areas more and more with Soviet immigration (and thus with a serious threat to the sustaining of national traditions and culture). Thus, while during the Stalinist period the cinematic villages and small-towns marked the integration of the 'small and quiet Estonia' into the bloodstream of the great Soviet empire, later, after the emergence of the Estonian national cinema in the early 1960s, small towns and rural areas turned into hubs of subversion and came to signify the sovereignty and vitality of the local culture.<sup>18</sup>

## SACRED LIGHTS

Although the Estonian feature films of the period lack one of the characteristic devices of Russian productions—the sudden 'leap' of the hero and his mentors from the total periphery to the absolute centre, i.e. Moscow (see Clark 2003: 14), they still always present a segment of its sacral space—as an icon. The relationship between the sacred centre and the profane periphery is manifested on a reduced scale: the ideologically most important episodes and actions always include Stalin's (and later, after his denouncement Lenin's) portrait, which often literally towers in the frame above all that is profane. The office of a party organiser, a central committee officer or some other important official becomes a ritual chapel, adorned with the sacral representation of the highest power. Again, *Life in the Citadel* and *Light in Koordi* provide the most obvious and probably also the most extreme examples. Whereas, in the former, Stalin's bust oversees only the scene set in the Town Soviet, where questions of land amelioration are being discussed, testifying to the subject's utmost ideological relevance, in the latter Stalin's portraits and statues are scattered all over the mise-en-scène, accompanying almost every episode where the establishment of a collective farm is considered; finally, his

name appears even on a combine harvester. In films made after the mid-1950s, however, the decreased number of Lenin's portraits bears witness to the disapprobation of the leader cult.

Before that happened, though, the heroes of films were the priests of this religion, and Stalin's collected works its Holy Bible. The sacred obligation of these protagonists was to study his Word and preach it to mortals: in the *Light in Koordi*, we see Paul Runge, the main character, a former officer of the Red Army, sitting at a desk far past midnight and reading Stalin's collected works in the flickering light of an oil lamp. Light is indeed one of the most common references to the sacred space:<sup>19</sup> the fictional village of Koordi is literally filled—as the title suggests—with the light of the Soviet Paradise. In this film, another option for suggesting this matrix of sacred space can be found: namely that all roads lead to Moscow. In the very beginning of the film, we see a road sign to Koordi and the name of the village is written both in Latin and in Cyrillic letters. The Estonian historian Evald Laasi has described this as one of the many shameful historical errors of this film: he argues that it was impossible to have such a signpost with Cyrillic letters, since the action of this particular scene occurs in the autumn of 1944—at the time when the Soviet troops had just entered the Estonian territory, which had previously been occupied by the Germans. Here, I believe, it is useful to turn to Evgeny Dobrenko, who in his recent study *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History* contends, using a quotation by Pierre Sorlin, that 'History is not pre-existent to the film, it is produced by it... it is not a reality used by the film; it has to be rebuilt and the result of the reconstruction is never reliable.' (Sorlin 1980: 170; cited in Dobrenko 2008: 2.) Dobrenko goes on to argue convincingly that 'true 'historical reality' lies not in the subject (representations of the past) but precisely in the time of production; that is, the historical film does in fact construct history, but also 'reflects' above all the time of its production.' (Dobrenko 2008: 4.) Thus, the road sign in *Light in Koordi* has to be observed in the (ideological) context of the making of the film—1951 and the Stalinist regime—and not in the context of 1944 and the German occupation. Then it becomes clear

that it refers to the system where Moscow is the centre and Koordi one of the many peripheral points.

## IDYLL AND BORDERS

Although Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas regarding the idyllic chronotope only reverberate with Soviet Estonian films of the 1950s to a certain extent, their application still provides valuable insight. According to Bakhtin, the core of the idyllic chronotope

finds expression predominantly in the special relationship that time has to space...: an organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks, crannies, its familiar mountains, valleys, fields, rivers and forests, and one's own home. Idyllic life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world, where the fathers and grandfathers lived... This little spatial world is limited and sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of the world. (Bakhtin 2004: 225.)

18 The juxtaposition of urban and rural settlements, as well as the constant tension between the respective lifestyles, has also been a persistent metaphor in East Central European cinemas (see, e.g., Iordanova 2003: 102ff). While in the countries of the Soviet bloc film-makers' continuing interest in the subject resulted in a diverse array of portrayals, from representations of 'the village as an idyllic sphere where community life is sweetly preserved' to 'films that offered serious critique of the stubborn residues of a paternalistic system', from 'films dealing with the difficult years of ... forced collectivisation' to those scrutinising 'the incompetent administration ... that led to the destruction of many positive features of traditional life' (Iordanova 2003: 102–103), the Soviet Estonian cinema of the 1950s offers more unilateral depictions of villages as overcoming the struggles under the previous capitalist system and thriving under the new socialist regime. Only later, starting in the early 1960s, did the spectre of representational modes expand.

19 A comparable example of the epic battle between brightness and darkness can be found, for instance, in Polish Stalinist cinema: *Bright Fields (Jasne lany, 1947)* 'is set in a village symbolically called Dark Fields. Its story line and its schematic propagandist content are formulated by the film's positive hero, a village teacher, whose message is that "Dark Fields must change to Bright Fields."' (Haltof 2002: 59.) According to Tadeusz Lubelski (cited in Haltof 2002: 59), audiences rejected the film (the same thing happened in Estonia with *Light in Koordi*) and it was deemed anti-propagandistic by the authorities (while the makers of *Light in Koordi* received another set of State Stalin Prizes).

Many films of the 1950s, especially those of the early part of the decade, indeed evoke a strong sense of ‘familiar territory’ and attachment of people to their homes, supported by numerous visual features of what is considered to be a ‘typical idyll’, even if it is presented in a shell of socialist realist lustre. At the same time, Bakhtin’s remark about ‘an organic fastening-down ... of life and its events to a place’ seems to contradict the aforementioned socialist realist/tourist spatial strategy of detaching action from its immediate environment/nature. Bakhtin also talks about ‘a sequence of generations’ (Bakhtin 2004: 225) as a crucial part of idyllic life, but in the films, on the contrary, the plots strive towards a decisive rupture of this nexus if we understand this ‘sequence’ in terms of, say, class or social status. Bakhtin’s idyllic chronotope indeed seems to suggest that the chain of generations shares not only blood ties but also a certain stability in the overall social matrix. Thus, the fact that, for example, in *Light in Koordi* the final episode stresses how farmhands have become masters, indicates an important digression from the idyll as understood by Bakhtin. Moreover, while Bakhtin characterises the idyll in temporal terms as ‘a cyclical progression’ as opposed to ‘a vector following historical progress’ (Deltcheva, Vlasov 1997: 537), the films of the 1950s evidently support the latter (although, theoretically, upon arrival in the ultimate age of communism the former was likely to gain ground). Similarly, although initially the villages, suburbs and small towns are depicted in the films as relatively closed spatial entities, the story-lines clearly advance towards a specific openness beyond the borders of those entities, towards new ideological horizons; the connection with other places/new conceptions is, thus, absolutely essential in these films, even though these ‘other places’ are limited to the quite particular geographical and political area of ‘one sixth of the world’.

The dynamics between different spatio-temporal frameworks finds eloquent expression in the recurring theme of borders and border-crossing which is an intrinsic, yet perhaps latent, part of the idyllic chronotope. The topic of borders comes especially to the fore in the mid-1950s, indicating a shift towards Khrushchev’s

‘Thaw’, which is characterised by a slightly more diverse, although no less skewed spatial model. The borders don’t seem to hold that tightly any longer; the seductive ooze of subversive Western influences is particularly strong on the Baltic rim of the USSR: spies, consumer goods and dissident ideologies penetrate the Iron Curtain (admittedly not very successfully) in films such as *Uninvited Guests*, *Underwater Reefs*, *Yachts at Sea* etc.

#### VICIOUS VILLAS

Paradoxically, this relative openness brings forth an even stronger sense of seclusion, repeatedly suggested by distrust of the West—both in the form of the geographical and historical outside. Most evidently, as proposed above, the West beyond the Iron Curtain seeped through the Baltic borders in the shape of malicious, yet not-so-cunning secret agents; but it also appeared as an ideologically biased representation of Western locations and certain historical events or places. The actual West (Sweden in this case) is, in the 1950s, only represented in the *Uninvited Guests*: the dark rain-wet asphalt streets are lit up by dozens of bright and alluring neon signs,<sup>20</sup> bourgeois youth grooves to intoxicating jazz-beats, and the headquarters of Swedish-Estonian spies are equipped with Bauhausian metal-tube furniture and decorated with abstract paintings—all this adds up to a description of the ultimate depravity of the West. Similarly, the historical(ly Western) environment is shown as despicable and corrupt in actual representations of the pre-war Republic (the slums of *In the Back Yard* and *The Männards*; the rich industrialists in *June Days*), but even more importantly, also in cases where remnants of the old days appear in the Soviet present. Notably, this happens most often in one quite central and dominant architectural metaphor: that of the private villa. It is significant that the very first post-war Soviet Estonian feature film, *Life in the Citadel*, presents a single-family house as one of its characters: Prof. Miilas’s villa, surrounded by a two-and-a-half metre high fence, actually symbolises the professor himself; they merge into an integrated life form. Although, as already suggested

above, Katerina Clark and Vera Dunham have argued that in the post-war period the pre-war militarist-flavoured cultural field was, after the victorious end of the war, penetrated by certain ‘softer’ values and even some petit-bourgeois features, the villas did not, by any means, have any positive connotations in the post-war Soviet Estonian cinema. Rather the opposite was true: Miilas’s citadel and later several other cinematic villas clearly became the symbols of ‘bourgeois nationalism’, consistently connected with wickedness, falsehood and debauchery, with reactionary mentality, straightforwardly or indirectly attached to attacks against the Soviet regime or at least to dangerous and illicit attempts at subverting it. These villas have a certain vicious and corrupt flavour, which resonates perfectly with the undesirable characteristics of their inhabitants. For instance, in the *Life in the Citadel*, the much-condemned introverted-ness is suggested on several levels of the narrative. First, of course, the design of the villa and its surrounding yard together with the protective barrier (significantly, the original white picket fence is still intact inside the bigger enclosure) provide the most vivid symbol, exhibited on several occasions in shots prominently foregrounding the height of the fence. Inside, the professor’s study forms the core of the citadel: from floor to ceiling, the walls are stuffed with bookshelves, and the windows tightly covered with thick curtains to keep the noises (and the (socialist) light) of the external world firmly outside; the detachment of the professor’s academic realm from everyday banalities is further suggested by several plaster statues of ancient scientists and philosophers. Secondly, the dialogues repeatedly stress the enclosure of the professor’s household (‘Nobody invades Prof. Miilas’s citadel’; ‘After eight o’clock nobody can enter our house or leave it’; ‘Wait until morning, maybe then you’ll be allowed into this castle’ etc.). Finally, the professor not only hides in his study but also prefers to research plants because ‘they are quiet’; he does not allow ‘any other truth but his’ into his dwelling—even his children are prohibited from being exposed to any unwanted ideologies (going to the university is forbidden, not to mention joining the army). To reinforce this negative

image even further, the ‘Professor’s home is turned into a genuine pirate’s pit’, as argued by Tatjana Elmanoviš (1988: 59): his older son Ralf, from his first marriage, who turns out to be the warden of a Nazi concentration camp, appears on his father’s doorstep after the Red Army has defeated the German troops and secretly hides in his quarters ‘guns, ammunition, golden dentures of concentration camp victims, forged documents, foreign currency, poison and some sort of fantastic explosive coal [sic!].’ (Elmanoviš 1988: 59.)

Later, in *Underwater Reefs*, an old captain’s villa acquires similarly vicious connotations. The *film noir*-like cinematography—low-key lighting and angular shots—adapted to its representation, carries sinister overtones even in the first encounter, an impression even further enforced by the obvious decay of the building. The villa once belonged to a captain whose daughter fell in love with a young lad—the later chairman of the fishing kolkhoz—and who forbade the young couple to marry because of the boy’s low social status and poverty. After the war, the villa is inhabited by the morally corrupt chief accountant of the fishing kolkhoz, who moves to the seaside village from ‘the city’ together with his sister—single and idle. The sister seduces the chairman shamelessly, despite his recent and apparently happy marriage to a local girl. The villa’s—and its inhabitants’—viciousness becomes especially perceptible in repeated scenes of dissipation: the accountant and his sister throw several parties, where small circles enjoy smuggled liquor and goods from the West (the border, again). Similarly, a self-indulgent celebration of the rich industrialist’s daughter’s birthday on the eve of the Soviet invasion, in *June Days*, on the family’s luxurious estate, signifies an ultimately un-Soviet mentality—and the fact that the party ends with a fatal quarrel, during which the industrialist’s son is lethally shot by his abandoned mistress signifies the definitive deadlock of the previous, bourgeois regime. Incidentally, the design of the villa was a real work of art by the production designer Peeter Linzbach, who had in the

20 This *noir*-style opening sequence was actually shot on location in Riga, Latvia.

1930s made films in Berlin and Paris, working, for example, with Lazare Meerson on the crew of René Clair's *Under the Roofs of Paris* (*Sous les toits de Paris*, 1930). Strangely enough, the West-influenced *mise-en-scène*, as well as some recognisable genre traits (*film noir* in *Underwater Reefs*, melodrama in *June Days*) and other cinematic devices—not to mention numerous other physical and mental signs of life beyond the borders of the Soviet Union—open up this enclosed space a bit in the end, even if the insiders of the Soviet sphere are left with only a growing sense of seclusion.

Although contemporary Estonian film studies have rarely dealt with this period of local film history, often on the grounds that it is just not worth the effort, this investigation of spatial representations hopefully has revealed them as an extremely interesting subject of research, not just in terms of depictions of space, but also as intriguing examples of specific audiovisual utterances. These films should not be judged as artistically mediocre works, but rather as complicated and fascinating examples of cultural production. The cinematic heritage of the late 1940s and the 1950s is an integral part of the Estonian and, perhaps even more importantly, East European complex visual culture, which is waiting to be rediscovered.

## FILMS

*Andrus Finds Happiness* (*Andruse õnn*), dir. Herbert Rappaport. Estonia, 1955

*Battleship Potemkin* (*Броненосец Потёмкин*), dir. Sergei Eisenstein. Russia, 1925

*Bright Fields* (*Jasne lany*), dir. Eugeniusz Cekalski. Poland, 1947

*Fishermen* (*Kalurid*), cinematographer Konstantin Märska. Estonia, 1936

*Ice-Drift* (*Jääminek*), dir. Kaljo Kiisk. Estonia, 1962

*In Rain and Sunshine* (*Vihmas ja päikeses*), dir. Herbert Rappaport. Estonia, 1960

*In the Back Yard* (*Tagahoovis*), dir. Viktor Nevezhin. Estonia, 1957

*Joller the Actor* (*Näitleja Joller*), dir. Virve Aruoja. Estonia, 1960

*June Days* (*Juunikuu päevad*), dir. Viktor Nevezhin, Kaljo Kiisk. Estonia, 1957

*Life in the Citadel* (*Elu tsitadellis*), dir. Herbert Rappaport. Russia (Estonia), 1947

*Light in Koordi* (*Valgus Koordis*), dir. Herbert Rappaport. Russia (Estonia), 1951

*The Männards* (*Perekond Männard*), dir. Aleksandr Mandrykin. Estonia, 1960

*The Man with the Movie Camera* (*Человек с киноаппаратом*), dir. Dziga Vertov. Ukraine, 1929

*Marite*, dir. Vera Stroyeva. Russia (Lithuania), 1947

*Mischievous Curves* (*Vallatud kurvid*), dir. Juli Kun, Kaljo Kiisk. Estonia, 1959

*Old Thomas Was Stolen* (*Varastati Vana Toomas*), dir. Semyon Shkolnikov. Estonia, 1971

*Rainis*, dir. Yuli Raizman. Latvia, 1949

*The Turning Point* (*Pöördel*), dir. Aleksandr Mandrykin, Kaljo Kiisk. Estonia, 1957

*Under the Roofs of Paris* (*Sous les toits de Paris*), dir. René Clair. France, 1930

*Underwater Reefs* (*Veealused karid*), dir. Viktor Nevezhin. Estonia, 1959

*Uninvited Guests* (*Kutsumata küllalised*), dir. Igor Yeltsov. Estonia, 1959

*Woman Heats the Sauna (Naine kütab sauna)*, dir. Arvo Kruusement. Estonia, 1978

*Yachts at Sea (Jahid merel)*, dir. Mikhail Yegorov. Estonia, 1955

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