

Approaches to the Subject of Outer Space in Soviet Estonian Graphic Art

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This paper stemmed from the exhibition held in the Cabinet of Prints and Drawings in the Kumu Art Museum,¹ and aims to provide a context and conceptual basis to study works completed during 1957–1991 (from the launch of the first artificial satellite until Estonia regained its independence). The Space Age is one of the most significant phenomena of the 20th century, and found notable expression in culture and everyday life, both in the Western world and in the Soviet Union. However, the subject of outer space in Soviet Estonian art is connected with other problems: Estonia's forced inclusion in the USSR, the possibilities for contributions and critiques in such a situation, strategies of resistance etc.

Summary

The Space Age, its canon and the Estonian reception

The start of the Space Age is considered to date back to 4 October 1957, when the Soviet Union sent the first artificial satellite into space. However, the space flight of the later cult figure Yuri Gagarin in 1961 was seen as an even more important milestone. In the context of the Cold War, the space industry served as one of the most important aspects of the arms race competition between the USSR and the United States, both in military and ideological terms. In Soviet art, the subject of outer space was one of the most favoured by the authorities. The cosmonaut became the symbol of the Soviet man; the glorification of space heroes (in the manner of Realism) served as the apotheosis of the socialist world order and its scientific, technical and cultural progress.

In the culture of the Estonian SSR, the reception of the Soviet space programme was less enthusiastic than in the heart of the Union. At the same time, space exploration as part of the scientific-technical revolution carried a positive meaning that was associated with more than ideology. Illusions of 'Socialism with a human face' during the Thaw were encouraged by the liberalisation and modernisation of the society, as well as by technological achievements. Although the subject of space exploration, imposed for propaganda purposes from a higher level, did not receive wide recognition in Estonian art, artists also did not wish to be left out of the discussion of topical problems. Besides, the semantic field of outer space was very wide, making it possible to seek interpretations and forms different from the pro-Soviet ones. In

1 *Cosmonauts, flying saucers and astronomers: the subject of outer space in Soviet Estonian graphic art*, Kumu Art Museum, November 2008 – December 2009.

Soviet Estonia, it was precisely the field of graphic art that dealt, on different semantic levels, with the subject of outer space.

Ideology and propaganda

Space exploration seemed to be a sort of colonisation, which brought up the issues of dividing spheres of influence, and the competition between America and the USSR in the arms race and the launching of space programmes. In his *Rocket Weapons* series (1968), Avo Keerend depicted the sky and outer space as hostile; the spirit of conflict is suggestively rendered through bright and ominous protruding surfaces.

Propaganda mechanisms functioned even more straightforwardly in poster art: in parallel with the peaceful application of space devices and the rhetoric of progress, there were warning signs and slogans aimed at aggressors, such as 'Let eternal peace triumph on Earth!'. Besides graphic design, some prints also carried a programmatic message. *The Victory of the Proletariat and Science* (1970), by Väino Tõnisson, praised the Revolution as the carrier of progress: next to the portrait of Lenin we can see the launched *Vostok* spacecraft and a cosmonaut. Ilmar Torn's print from the triptych *May There Always Be Sunshine* (1964) depicts a cosmonaut as a guardian of peace.

The Soviet universe

Subsequently, the cosmonaut became a representative figure. In *Kaleidoscope* (1969), by Allex Kütt, *Lenin* (1970), by Renaldo Veeber, and *Lenin II* (1970), by Ilmar Torn, cosmonauts are depicted as an inherent part of the Soviet society. The cosmonaut – and more widely, the cosmos – was an element which signified an all-encompassing aspect of the representation of the Soviet world.

All three compositions are based on the principle of montage, which became topical in Soviet art during the 1970s, enabling artists to combine elements in different styles and encouraging multiple interpretations. These works praised the mechanisms of the totalitarian regime, at the same time revealing its nature.

Space and science

The observatory of the Academy of Sciences of the Estonian SSR in Tõravere was the largest in the Baltic countries and also developed devices for space research. *Observatory* (1973), a representative cycle by Kütt, is a series portraying the prominent figures in Estonian astronomy, with montage as its principal formal solution. Various attributes are used to recreate the context: astronomical symbols, (radio) telescopes etc. Each work includes motifs associated with a specific scientist: in *Observatory IV*, dedicated to Charles Villmann, we see the noctilucent clouds, observed in only three other centres in the world besides Tõravere. Villmann defended his Candidate's thesis *On the physical nature of noctilucent clouds*, and he also served as the chairman of the respective All-Soviet Union commission.

Herald Eelma also showed a scientific-historical perspective in his work *Bridges II* (1974), which displays flying and the studying of the sky as the greatest endeavours of humankind: besides aeroplanes and *Sputnik* satellites, this work also includes the wings of Icarus.

Futuristic visions

Icarus can also be seen in *Cosmos* (1971), by Veeber, where the mythological image is again placed in the same chronotope with the futuristic man/cosmonaut. It was precisely its potential as a symbol

of the future that became an important aspect in the subject of outer space: outer space became a metaphor for the future, providing an opportunity to create futuristic utopias. In the prints *Futurum* (1967) and *To Another Planet* (1968), by Kütt, space flights are an inherent part of the lifestyle of the human race. The reality created by the artist is conditional, based on biomorphic formal language: city, spacecraft and cosmodrome seem to constitute a single entity here.

The colouring book *Into the Year 2000*, designed by Tõnis Vint, provided multiple visions of the future. Drawing on contemporary developments, it depicted the future world and its aesthetic: naturally, the subject of outer space played an important role in it. Minimalist visual language provided an elegant result and, supposedly, *Into the Year 2000* influenced the taste of the entire generation. Ülevi Eljand also used Pop-like artistic language in his *Departure* (1972), which, however, is not utopian, but ironic, serving as a deconstruction of the cosmonaut cult.

The image of space as a means of critique

Besides optimistic visions, the image of outer space was used in critiques too, aimed mainly at political and ecological issues. During the 1960s, rhetoric directed against nuclear war was common in Estonian printmaking: *Enough!* (1964), by Olev Soans, and *War Flower* (1967), by Alex Kütt, served as protests against putting humanity in danger. The call to avoid catastrophes here works on a global level.

The Sun Flower (1967), by Soans, was associated with the International Quiet Sun Year (1964–1965), aimed to study the sun and its terrestrial and planetary effects. However, the endless optimism

that characterised the beginning of the Space Age soon gave way to serious problems. *Moonscape* (1988), by Torn, is part of a series criticising the polluting of the environment. A moonscape is no longer the carrier of futuristic pathos; it is a place where life cannot exist.

The myth of the UFO

The early 1970s witnessed a true UFO boom; literature about UFOs as an alternative (esoteric) branch of learning was important in the Soviet information black-out, as well as being a strategy of resistance. Carl G. Jung treated 'things seen in the sky' as a modern myth, seeing the archetypes of epiphany in round objects sighted in UFO cases. The compositional scheme of *Stairs* (1969), by Soans, greatly resembles William Blake's *Jacob's Ladder* (1799–1806): here too the epiphanic symbolism of a stairway carries great importance.

In the human consciousness, aliens took the form of divine messengers. In *Letters from Sirius II* (1986), Vint used an ornamental motif, a diagonal cross inside a rectangle, which forms into a 'real' envelope; close to it floats a small flying saucer. In *Flying and Landed* (1980), a print diptych by Illimar Paul, a flying saucer is stylised into a decorative Pop-like sign, whereas in *Menace above Town* (1968), by Evi Tihemets, abstract objects above a town serve as a metaphor for gloom and danger. Beside mythologisation and demonization of outer space, a more neutral approach could be taken: the work *Balls above the Village* (1978), by Urmas Ploomipuu, is reminiscent of a photograph documenting some UFO anomaly, but there is also a touch of metaphysics in it.

The subject of UFOs was associated with space psychedelia, linked to the aesthetic of the Hippie sub-culture. The

cartoon movies *Flight* (1973; director Rein Raamat, artist Avo Paistik) and *Klaabu in Space* (1981; director Avo Paistik, artist Mati Kütt) are Pop-like and psychedelic. UFOs and space psychedelia often remained ambivalent: *Aliens in Tallinn* (1973), an ink drawing by Eljand, is rather ambiguous. A zeppelin has landed like a spacecraft on the tower of the Oleviste Church; the welcoming demonstration, however, turns into a Bacchanal.

Microcosm, macrocosm

The conception that emphasised the unity of the 'small' and 'large' order of the world (man and the universe) also extended to nanophysical and macrophysical phenomena of the 20th century. Through images of the micro- and macrocosm, artists dealt with the problems of the present day, whereas the timeless topic allowed them to distance themselves from the present and create a personal reality. *Rockets* (1971), by Vello Vinn, belongs to the private artistic world based on Escher-like illusions: the fantastic cosmodrome is located on a shell, and rockets growing out of the sea resemble seashells.

In *The Sun Flower*, by Soans, a giant sunflower forms the centre of the galaxy. Comparing a celestial body with a flower demonstrates the fragility of the former. In *Garden* (1979), by Eelma, a reference to the principle of cosmic analogy is made through the resemblance between the moonscape and garden stones. Eelma had illustrated *Kalevala*, which had influenced the epic language of his graphic art. Leonhard Lapin's ambivalent series *Cosmic Machine* (1977) marked a turning point in the treatment of the micro- and macrocosm: the idea that a machine is a piece of artificial nature, but also a conception of the universe as a giant

machine, seems full of pathos and seems to be socio-critical at the same time, and can be interpreted in various ways.

In conclusion

Thus, during a relatively short period of time, several different stages in the visual treatment of outer space were gone through: in parallel, or consecutively, ideological, utilitarian and poetic approaches to outer space were activated. Graphic art works in the Estonian SSR were good examples of treating an ideological subject, often for the sake of artists' own (formal) searches, and often by shifting meanings. When dealing with outer space as a socially topical subject, Estonian graphic artists mostly drew on their own convictions, avoiding aspects which would clearly come off as propaganda.

Works dealing with the subject of outer space usually did not form independent sets but, rather, they formed a part of graphic series depicting a wider subject area, adding to it an all-encompassing generalisation. Besides optimistic visions, warnings and critical or absurd or generally philosophical approaches were important. In the context of the discoveries of the Space Age, several fundamental questions were still left without final answers; cosmology remained one of the most existential narratives of mankind and the cosmos became a metaphor for the matrix of world construction.

*Translated by Epp Aareleid-Koop
proof-read by Richard Adang*