

Cartoons and/or Art

On the Relationship of Two Fields in Estonia, Based on Priit Pärn's Creative Career

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Summary

This article is about Priit Pärn's career outside the realm of animated films, focusing on his endeavours as a cartoonist, illustrator and printmaker between the late 1960s and the end of the 1980s. Through Pärn, a key figure in the field at the time, some light is also shed on that particular era in the history of Estonian cartoons in general. The main aim of the article is to map the ties between Pärn's work and the contemporary avant-garde and high art of Soviet Estonia.

Throughout his creative career, Priit Pärn (b. 1946) has simultaneously worked in several fields. This article attempts to shed some light on two aspects of his work that tend to be somewhat overshadowed by his animated films: his career as a cartoonist and illustrator, and his somewhat complicated relationship with 'high art'. Pärn achieved fame mostly through his work in media or genres outside of the traditional realm of 'high art' (animation, illustration and cartoon drawing). This article, mainly based on interviews and contemporary press coverage, seeks to point out that 'Pärn the popular cartoonist' has constantly displayed serious artistic ambitions.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, young Pärn's endeavours mirrored those of contemporary Estonian avant-garde artists. He seems to have had a mentality similar to the underground cartoonists of the West. However, as the circumstances in Soviet Estonia would not allow and could not sustain a counterculture, Pärn ended up publishing his works in the more liberal publications of the official press. He quickly achieved recognition as one of the nation's most talented young cartoonists, but for Pärn this wasn't enough. He strove to expand the limits of the cartoon genre, both in the artistic and the intellectual sense, and to extend his creative reach further, into comics, animation, printmaking, and even installations, thus becoming a key figure in reshaping the mainstream of contemporary Estonian cartoon art. The height of his activity in the field in the 1970s coincided with its golden age, and his style had a remarkable impact on the next generation of cartoonists.

Pärn published his first cartoons while still in high-school in the mid-1960s. The overall face of Estonian cartoons at

the time was rather simplistic, with a common, appealing, line-based drawing style influenced by contemporary international cartoons. Selected, inoffensive examples of the latter were often published in local newspapers and the satire magazine *Pikker* (while ignoring copyrights). The preferred content of cartoons was moralistic, for example exposing and ridiculing 'the enemies of the Soviet Union and the working class', but many cartoonists preferred more light-weight, apolitical themes, such as jokes about modern life and relationships. Pärn started out following this common style, but outgrew it during his studies at Tartu University, due to the radical influences of the youth culture of the late 1960s.

Pärn chose to study biology in Tartu, after realizing his drawing skills weren't good enough to gain him entry to the National Institute of Arts. He was certainly interested in art, even though his contacts with the famous groups of Estonian avant-garde artists of the time (*ANK '64*, *Visarid* and *SOUP 69*) remained only superficial. However, he was an integral member of another rather avant-garde group called *Rajacas* (active in 1967–1970), which has been largely overlooked by art history because it consisted of biology and geography students rather than artists or art students. The group's popular public performances consisted of absurd, often improvisational, sketches that in hindsight have been compared to those of Monty Python. According to Pärn, the main aim of *Rajacas* was to test the tolerance limits of Soviet officials through rude and political jokes. Indeed, the group eventually had to disband under the threat of expulsion.

Although *Rajacas* is hardly mentioned in the history of Estonian avant-garde art (largely written in the past two decades),

it should be pointed out that there doesn't seem to have been a sharp division between the realms of 'real art' and such 'minor genres' as cartoons at the time. For example, the young avant-garde painters Ando Keskküla and Andres Tolts also drew surrealist cartoons together, and another radical young cartoonist, Pärn's friend Toomas Kall, took part in the famous avant-garde art exhibition *Harku '75* in 1975. Although the circumstances of Soviet Estonia prevented the emergence of a full-blown counterculture, Pärn's generation appears to have shared a similar protest-driven mentality that reached across different fields of activity.

Besides *Rajacas*, Pärn channelled his early creative efforts into drawing cartoons and illustrations. Although the attitude of his pictures was quite similar to the underground cartoons of the West, his drawing style at the time bears no marks of direct influences. Instead, between 1968 and 1972, he dropped all aesthetic pretences and attempted to draw at the rawest, most basic level possible. This served to disguise his lack of skill, as well as laying the foundation for eventually developing a drawing style of his own. Pärn chose to teach himself, displaying a characteristic reluctance towards taking advice, and indeed soon gained attention for his unique approach. Besides its crude appearance, his work stood out because of its contents: instead of the common mild, safe, moralistic jokes, Pärn's drawings were filled with absurdity, moral ambivalence and cynicism.

Reactions varied: there was a fair amount of irritation, but also immediate praise for his wit, freshness and modernity. Among his early fans was Kalju Kass, an editor working for the Tartu newspaper *Edasi*. By the time Pärn

graduated in 1970 (and found work at the Tallinn Botanical Gardens), he had already published nearly 200 cartoons.

It should be noted that not all publications were willing to risk irritating officials with cartoons such as Pärn's (including *Pikker*), but the overall demand for cartoons was high and young amateur cartoonists like him found outlets in the more radical newspapers, such as *Edasi* and the weekly *Sirp ja Vasar* (particularly after Toomas Kall started working there in 1972), as well as in the youth magazine *Noorus*. It still took extra effort from editors to get risky cartoons into print, which many of the young cartoonists found frustrating. Pärn and Kall's joint first book, *Milline kaunis paik / Siin triumfikaare all* (Tallinn: Kunst, 1977), compiled in 1972, had to wait for a 'suitable release moment' for nearly six years.

There was also a generational divide between Estonian cartoonists working at the time, marked not so much by age but by the willingness to comply with the demands of censorship, as opposed to having the will to challenge them. The group with the latter tendencies despised the others, a certain circle of cartoonists mostly working for the well-paying but ideologically conformist magazine *Pikker*. Those not favoured by *Pikker* shared a critical, even cynical outlook and their work often reflected existential angst. Striving to be poignant or witty rather than being funny was also common. Pärn soon stood out with his intellectual and artistic ambition, not just among this peer group, but among Estonian cartoonists in general. Around 1972, he set out to develop his artistic skills, moving far away from the usual look of Estonian cartoons, trying out style after style, until he finally reached a wholly idiosyncratic style in the 1980s.

The first phase, around 1973, was influenced by psychedelic underground art, filtered through mainstream popular culture. Next, there was a belated but vivid pop art phase, mostly channelled into the children's comic book *Kilplased* (Tallinn: Kunst, 1977), a by-product of Pärn's first working experience in animation: art directing Rein Raamat's 1974 short film of the same name. Although the book was very popular, it has yet to secure a worthy position in the legacy of Estonia's pop art.

In the mid-1970s, Pärn quit his job at the Botanical Gardens to work full-time in the Tallinnfilm studio's drawn animation department. His next children's book, *Tagurpidi* (Tallinn: Kunst, 1980), displayed leftover script ideas in comic book form, using pop art as well as elements of hyperrealism and even hints of postmodernism. The ambitious book was well received and its playful approach to storytelling and many visual paradoxes influenced a whole generation of children. However, the book never really caught the attention of art critics or art historians. (The re-release in 2005 did bring along some literary treatises.)

Finally, Pärn entered a surrealist phase, most vividly expressed in drawings displayed at Pärn's exhibitions in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Surrealism has perhaps been the most important undercurrent of his work, and although it has gone in and out of fashion over the decades, at the time it clearly linked Pärn to contemporary high art. Surrealism was one of the driving forces of Soviet underground art, as well as one of the central themes in contemporary Estonian printmaking.

One of Pärn's motives for paying more attention to the artistic side of his work was the opportunity to take part in international cartoon exhibitions.

As was true of other young Estonian cartoonists, he had started to mail his work to open exhibitions abroad around 1972. Taking part in such exhibitions meant receiving catalogues, which was a welcome chance to see modern, uncensored foreign cartoons. Besides receiving the catalogues, Pärn also won several awards, which in turn gained him attention and professional respect at home.

The 1970s turned out to be a good time for Estonian cartoons overall. The middle of the decade brought a drop in censorship vigilance, even at *Pikker*, and the younger generation, among whom Pärn was the key figure, led the genre to new artistic and intellectual heights, as well as to new heights of popularity. However, this golden age didn't last long. By the late 1970s, censorship had become more rigorous again and the frustration caused by this began pushing the genre towards its decline.

Pärn himself had started to distance himself from cartooning in the late 1970s: he had an exciting new career in animation and was growing tired of the cartoon genre's limitations. By 1980, he preferred drawing illustrations for the children's magazine *Täheke* to struggling with the censorship at *Pikker* (he also went on to publish another children's book, a collection of visual puns and gags called *Naljapildiaabits* – Tallinn: Kunst, 1984). His drawings were still absurd, grotesque and rich in irony, but in a way that drifted further and further out of the realm of cartoons and into the territory of art, with a focus on the visual aspect rather than the narrative.

When Pärn's animation career, plagued by troubles with censorship, appeared to stall around 1984, he considered starting over as a freelance printmaker

and illustrator, and even joined the Artists' Union with that purpose in mind. In hindsight, his subsequent career as a printmaker appears to have been reasonably successful, with many respectable exhibition appearances and awards, but Pärn seems to look back on it with a hint of bitterness and still considers himself an outsider in that field. His background as a self-taught cartoonist may have caused some prejudice against his prints. On the other hand, it didn't take Pärn long to achieve the status of the nation's star cartoonist, and he went on to become the most outstanding animation talent in the land. However, in Estonia's highly professional, extremely competitive printmaking scene, he turned out to be only one of many.

Meanwhile, in the field of Estonian cartoons, the decline was deepening. Censorship managed to suffocate all the artistic and intellectual ambition of the previous decade and some of *Pikker*'s more 'old school' cartoonists were growing old. Under these depressing circumstances, a group of cartoonists working at Tallinnfilm studio's animation department, led by Pärn and Mati Kütt, managed to make a brief but powerful breakthrough into the realm of 'exhibition cartoons'. The group, calling themselves *Tallinnfilmi sürrrealistid*, held a self-titled exhibition in Tallinn in the summer of 1986 (later repeated in Tartu), displaying ironic objects and installations mostly made of garbage. The exhibition was wildly popular, but most viewers assumed it was meant to be a joke – after all, so many of the participants were cartoonists. The art critic Harry Liivrand was the only one to point out the connections with neo-Dadaism. However, similar installations by another group that debuted in the same year, *Rühm T*,

went down in Estonian art history as ground-breaking contemporary art.

A cartoon drawn by Pärn called 'Sitta kah!', published in *Sirp ja Vasar* on 8 May 1987, could be described both as the finest hour in the history of Estonian cartoons and as the beginning of their end. It depicts a Soviet field worker shovelling manure: the lump he is tossing away looks like the outline of Estonia on a map. The image effectively summed up a common Estonian feeling of protest against Soviet oppression. Despite Perestroika, publishing the picture outraged the high officials of Soviet Estonia and the resulting scandal gave Pärn the aura of a national hero.

On a wider scale, Perestroika provided cartoonists with a chance to express themselves more openly, but it was too late: by then, the new freedom of expression mostly served to showcase the depth of the genre's decline. Soon after, the economic turmoil preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union rendered the once substantial fees for published cartoons worthless, which in turn led to many freelance cartoonists quitting the field. This included Pärn, who was busy with his film career (no longer hindered by censorship) and with making a name for himself as an artist outside of Estonia. Since 1990, he has only published a handful of cartoons, instead focusing on his films, prints and drawings. Despite that, he has also remained one of the country's most celebrated cartoonists and illustrators, based on the reputation gained in the Soviet era, and due to the fact that there hasn't really been much competition in the field since. After the restoration of Estonia's independence, many of the former magazines and newspapers ran into financial trouble, including *Pikker* and *Noorus*, and eventually folded. Most of the cartoons in the press of the new era are

provided by a small handful of editorial cartoonists (the best of them are those who started out in the 1970s, influenced by Pärn's style), leaving little to no outlet for freelancers, including any potential newcomers. A genre that once had artistic aspirations high enough to claim to be a field of art has become entirely marginal.

Summary by author

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