

Conflicting Visions: Estonia and Estonians as Presented in the Cinema of the 1990s and 2000s

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This article is a brief analysis of Estonian film-makers' attempts to build and shape a presentable 'national image' on screen over the past two decades. These efforts are compared to some less flattering reflections of Estonia and Estonians in foreign productions during the same period.

Although the attempts to market Estonian films internationally are a recent phenomenon, it can be argued that most Estonian films made over the last 20 years address the issue of building a national public image to some degree. It should also be noted that nearly all the film-making in Estonia relies on state funding, and hence the few films made here each year are assigned an unspoken mission of representing the nation. It is assumed that a good feature film can be a powerful tool for promoting 'the Estonian cause' on the international arena. The subtext of this belief seems to be a search for some sort of national validation and acknowledgement through positive representations.

The article examines a number of Estonian genre films that mainly target the domestic audience. However, there's a certain expectation that if the plots are kept simple enough, foreign audiences will understand the films' content largely in the same way. The usual aim of such films from the viewpoint of building a national image is simply to offer proof that Estonia is a beautiful place with European values. But proving this point abroad is an uphill struggle. Even if some Estonian films manage to find international distribution, the buyers tend to prefer gloomy, artistic pieces. The reason might be that Estonian film-makers have so far not been particularly successful in packaging more positive messages into worthwhile films.

There are generally two kinds of approaches to creating a positive national image. The first and less entertaining one seeks to present Estonia as a kind of 'every place' – an average, nice-looking, reasonably wealthy European setting without a trace of anything post-Soviet. Although it might seem likely that such films could connect with an

international audience better, as they are not weighed down by a particular setting or specific cultural context, in reality they have turned out to be bland, unmemorable and unmarketable.

The second, more curious option consists of taking the culturally specific and giving it 'the Hollywood treatment' in the hope of making it palatable to the world. Probably the first Estonian film to fall into that category was *Those Old Love Letters* (1992, directed by Mati Põldre). It is an ambitious if slightly superficial biopic of the songwriter Raimond Valgre, whose brief life conveniently had all the necessary components for a Hollywood-style melodrama. The film turned out to be a local box office hit and a forerunner to a new era of domestic crowd-pleasing genre films. It was also in tune with the newly re-established nation-state's preferred vision of its past. Its rosy depiction of the 1930s suited the semi-official view of the previous independence years between 1918 and 1940 as a lost golden era.

The conservative undercurrent in Estonian culture, responsible for the most ambitious attempts at national image-building in film, apparently believes that both domestic and foreign audiences will be impressed by epic historical dramas that combine history lessons with hefty doses of action, thrills and romance. However, patriotic action-adventure dramas, such as *Names in Marble* (2002, directed by Elmo Nüganen) and *Decemberheat* (2008, directed by Asko Kase), have turned out to be clumsy, sentimental and overloaded with blatant propagandistic pathos. What's more worrying is that such patriotic fare (including the recent TV series *Windswept Land*) has had direct backing from the right-wing conservative party Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit. Its

high-ranking members with history degrees, including Mart Laar and Lauri Vahtre, who in the early 1990s played a part in re-conceptualising the Estonian nation-state as a direct continuation of the 1930s, have been involved with these productions as writers or consultants. This in turn has created the unpleasant result of reconstructing 'the historic truth' according to one political party.

Considering that the national cinematic output plays an active part in shaping and sustaining the nation's self-perception, it appears that, sadly, the Estonian taxpayers have ended up publicly funding the validation of the most conservative end of the national spectrum as its 'true' identity on screen. The irony of the matter is that the simplistic, conservative national narrative of such films only appeals to the already like-minded segment of the audience, leaving a large number of others feeling indifferent or alienated.

While the patriotic action-adventures, particularly *Names in Marble*, have been rather well received locally, the efforts to market them abroad have been met with blunt indifference even in neighbouring countries. Although such productions have had fairly big budgets in the local context, the twee imagery fails to distract from more substantial shortcomings, such as the dumbed-down, weak scripts or the embarrassingly dated attitudes.

There is some hope that an Estonian historical film with slightly less didactic baggage and a more adventurous spirit will have a broader appeal. Indeed, there are a few examples of Estonian adventure films generating a tongue-in-cheek national mythology: the historical parody *All My Lenins* (1997, directed by Hardi Volmer), and the low-budget spoof about Estonians fighting off crusaders in the 13th century,

Men at Arms (2005, directed by Kaaren Kaer). Both of these have managed to connect with international audiences a little better than the patriotic productions.

The few foreign films that have used Estonia as a location tend to present the country in a strikingly different light: yet another drab, miserable, dangerous Eastern European hell-hole. An early example is the Finnish thriller *City Unplugged* aka *Darkness in Tallinn* (1993, directed by Ilkka Järvilaturi). It is a low-budget but inventive *film noir* that presents the newly independent Estonia as the post-Soviet Wild East, dominated by organised crime, with a number of cartoonish villains and quirky local types. This was regarded as an embarrassing portrayal in Estonia.

Also worth a mention is a Swedish film called *Screwed in Tallinn* (1999, directed by Tomas Alfredson), a mockumentary about lonely Swedish men on a trip to meet women in Estonia. A successful mix of tragedy and dark comedy, the film was well received in Sweden. However, it is virtually unknown in Estonia, as the sex tourism theme shows the country in an embarrassing light. Also, it was shot in Paldiski, a drab former Soviet military base.

Another Swedish film using Paldiski as a location soon after was *Lilja 4-Ever* (2001, directed by Lukas Moodysson). This film went on to become an international hit, winning a number of awards. From an Estonian point of view, its success could be regarded as a minor national PR catastrophe, as *Lilja 4-Ever* is an extremely bleak, depressing story about a poor teenage girl first neglected by her family and then sold into sex slavery in Sweden, where she eventually commits suicide.

According to those three films, Estonia clearly is not a part of good old Europe; instead, it is a hostile, alien territory

stuck in some dreary post-Soviet limbo. Frustratingly, Estonia has also not ended up looking very good in the few foreign films that have more or less earnestly attempted to introduce the world to some fragment of our history or national narrative.

One such example is *Candles in the Dark* (1993, directed by Maximilian Schell), a little-known Christmas film made for American TV that rode a brief wave of interest in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. It tells a cheesy, romantic story about a spoiled American girl whose father, an Estonian living in exile, sends her to artfully dilapidated late-Soviet Tallinn, where she finds a dissident love interest and they manage to organize the country's first public Christmas celebration, defying the KGB. Also worth a mention in this category is a muddled German political thriller, *Baltic Storm* (2003, directed by Reuben Leder), focusing on a conspiracy theory about the sinking of the ferry MS Estonia in 1994, and failing to impress critics or audiences.

Both of these films represent the shallow, patronizing approach of placing an adventurer from a more evolved culture into an exotic setting and then describing the environment's peculiarities from the adventurer's point of view. This hardly ever produces results that aren't unfair or offensive to the exotic location in question: in *Candles*, the Estonians are either idealistic fools or KGB informants, while in *Baltic Storm* the country and its people are just pawns caught in a game far too big for them to grasp.

The few Estonian films that have been positively received in the West in recent years are those that are perhaps the least concerned with making Estonia look good: most notably the bleak, moody relationship drama *Autumn Ball* (2007, directed by

Veiko Õunpuu), which is set in Lasnamäe, the largest Soviet-era neighbourhood of Tallinn; and the provocative youth drama *Class* (2007, directed by Ilmar Raag). Both of these films make the surroundings and the natives appear depressing to the point of being grotesque. And yet, somehow foreign audiences tend to take these films for gritty, realistic representations of true life in Estonia – which again means a bleak, frightening place far away from the safe, reasonable Europe. While the overall look of these is more realistic than the cheesy re-creations in Estonian historical films, the thought of foreign viewers embracing this vision of Estonia as truthful is somewhat worrying. While neither extreme is necessarily a fair or good representation of Estonia or Estonians, at present there are no apparent strategies to overcome this conflict of visions.

Summary by author