

New Waves, New Spaces: Estonian Experimental Cinema of the 1970s

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The article concentrates on the films of Jaan Tooming, a rebellious Estonian *auteur* whose cinematic oeuvre of the 1970s was typically geared towards undermining the powers that be. His experimental films, especially the infamously banned *Endless Day* (1971/1990), favour Lefebvrian differential space over the abstract space of mainstream cinema, radically renewing the visual and narrative form of Estonian cinema and offering shifting registers of spatio-social portrayals and critiques of the Soviet ideological apparatus.

The true 'Estonian New Wave' has been defined by local critics as born and burgeoning in the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s,¹ when a new generation of young filmmakers entered the stagnated cinematic stage with bravado, finally inverting the low ebb that had lasted nearly a decade. Yet, in the midst of the ebbing waters of the early 1970s, a dark horse emerged, whose artistic contribution to Estonian cinematic heritage deserves to be identified as a new wave in miniature, a veritable diamond, albeit perhaps rough-cut. This author was Jaan Tooming, first and foremost known as an actor and a theatre director, whose films constitute a fundamentally unprecedented phenomenon in Estonian cinema. His controversial, stylistically and semantically rich output provides a fascinating order of spatial representations, which reconfigure Estonian cinematic territories in several respects and, at the same time, re-evaluate and criticise quite provocatively the historical and conceptual framework of imagining national, social and personal identities. The following investigation of Tooming's films will concentrate chiefly on the spatial representations and practices, with digressions into the domain of re/constructing identities, both personal and collective.

Tooming's cinematic oeuvre encompasses four films: *Endless Day* (1971/1990) and *Colorful Dreams* (1974), both co-directed with Virve Aruoja; *The Misadventures of the New Satan* (1977; initially a play he directed in Vanemuine, yet so much more than merely a taped

¹ E.g. Õ. Orav, Tallinnfilm I. Mängufilmid 1947–1976. Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus, 2003, pp. 54ff; L. Kärk, Mida oleks hea teada ajaloost? Eesti filmiloo lühikonspekt. – Teater. Muusika. Kino 1995, no. 8/9, p. 117; L. Kirt, Eesti nõukogude filmikunst tõusuteel. – Küsimused ja Vastused 1980, no. 8, pp. 33–34.

stage production) and, finally, *Man and Pine Tree* (1979). According to Peeter Linnap, the 'dynamism and expressivity of the formal language' of Tooming's films resembles first and foremost the ambiance of the works of the French *Nouvelle Vague* directors (Jean-Luc Godard and many others) as well as that of the kindred styles adopted at the beginning of the 1960s by many filmmakers in the Eastern bloc (Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary) and Soviet Russia.² (The Polish and Czechoslovakian influences were especially pertinent to the Estonian (film) culture in general and to Tooming's development as an author in particular.) However, it seems to me that, rather than drawing on comparisons to the French or any other Eastern European/Soviet versions of early new waves (that is, from the late 1950s to the early 1960s), Tooming's works should be situated within the conceptual territory and formal framework of the experimental filmmaking in a broader sense. The experimental, or avant-garde cinema, which is an umbrella term covering an extremely diverse array of cinematic practices, and in general indicates artistic activities 'that challeng[e] institutionalised cultural forms'³ and designates 'politically conscious, antibourgeois, activist art movements'⁴, is – according to its broadest definition – associated with the following formal/stylistic features: the rejection of traditional (linear) narrative; the use of abstracting visual devices; and unconventional treatment of the

soundtrack. All of these characteristics indeed apply to Tooming's films, although to a varying degree and in somewhat different renditions in each case.

The mainstream cinema produces abstract space, described by Henri Lefebvre as '[f]ormal and quantitative ... eras[ing] distinctions'⁵ and 'tend[ing] towards homogeneity, towards the elimination of existing differences or peculiarities'⁶, and designated by Andy Merrifield as 'the repressive economic and political space of the bourgeoisie'⁷, that is, the space of the dominant power and ideology. The experimental modes of cinematic expression, including those utilised by Tooming, conversely, capitalise on the 'differential space'⁸ that strives towards and honours distinctiveness, variation, diversity. As such, it poses a real threat to the stability and perseverance of the abstract space, which thus struggles to cancel it, or at least to disguise or delimit and confine it.

Endless Day, which was shot in 1971 on location in Tallinn, is diametrically opposed to the spatial discourse that dominated Estonian narrative cinema in the 1950s and 1960s, as does the whole corpus of Tooming's filmic output. Its frantically fragmented urban space and frenzied rhythms stand in absolute contrast to the somewhat romanticised and often comparatively composed and serene rural scenes of the previous decades, whose veiled allusions to nationally centred ambitions are altogether something else than the air of arrogance and provocatively

2 P. Linnap, *Astu parteisse ja nõua! Jaan Toominga ekspressionistlikud resistance-filmid ENSVs.* – Teater. Muusika. Kino 2002, no. 1, p. 62.

3 A. Butler, *Avant-Garde and Counter-Cinema.* – *The Cinema Book.* Ed. P. Cook. London: British Film Institute, 2007, p. 89.

4 A. B. Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950–1980.* Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 14.

5 H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, p. 49.

6 H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* p. 52.

7 A. Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Socialist in Space.* – *Thinking Space.* Eds. M. Crang, N. Thrift. London, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 175.

8 H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* p. 52.

biting criticism of the Soviet system offered by Tooming. He is haunted by a fundamental uneasiness towards the ways and workings not only of Soviet realities (his immediate socio-political surroundings), but also towards the paths taken by the urbanised, commodified and institutionalised civilisation, whether capitalist or socialist. This tendency is further intensified in his last film, *Man and Pine Tree*, where the protagonist's escape from his suburban home and the journey through the 'agro-urbanized'⁹ Estonian countryside communicate a sense of complete hopelessness, demonstrating the author's desperate discovery that even the wilderness, represented by the eponymous pine tree, might not provide a viable alternative to the utterly corrupted existence of humankind and to the artificial environment created by it.

Tooming's interest in places does not focus on specific architectural features, although he uses them as indicators of certain conditions and concepts. Rather, he treats the places as expressive *loci* of human thought, identity and (inter)-action. In fact, in close relation to and stemming from the latter, central to all Tooming's films is a strong sense of body and the bodily experience, as was the case with his theatrical productions¹⁰. The respective spatial experiences of the Man in *Endless Day* and the Man in *Man and Pine Tree* are framed and presented not only as visual experiences; the sensory spectre of their communications with the surroundings also encompasses the

senses of smell and, most importantly, touch. The notion of bodily experienced and lived space, which seems to underlie the 'spatial politics' of *Endless Day*, as well as the Man's visibly open and active attitude towards his surroundings, calls for an investigation of Tooming's approach towards personal and social identities. The Man and his relationship with the world can be described and understood in terms of Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic self. Taking on different tasks, roles and positions, shifting constantly between a multitude of activities, places and spaces, he is the incarnation of this self in a constant state of flux, 'open to the outside world' as is the Bakhtinian carnivalesque or grotesque body¹¹.

Tooming's subsequent films, along with his theatrical productions, however, channeled these multifarious and apparently rather undogmatic inclinations into a more clearly and narrowly defined conceptual watercourse. *Man and Pine Tree*, made eight years later, retains the 'active optics'¹² and spatial mobility (as a narrative form borrowed from road-movies/travel films), yet, unlike in *Endless Day*, the protagonist is in an inextricable conflict with and irretrievably alienated from the surrounding physical, ideological and mental environment. The (morally) disfigured nature of this environment is emphasised both by the distorted visual language of the image-track filmed in colour with an extremely wide-angle lens, and the woebegone, archaic chant of the sound-track, contrasting with the colourful imagery, yet also complementing

9 P. Maandi, *Change and Persistence in a Reformed Landscape: A Geographical Analysis of Land Reforms and Landscape Change in Muhu and Rapla Municipalities, Estonia, c. 1840 to 2003*. Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2005, p. 180

10 M. Unt, *Teatriuenduse algusest Nõukogude Eestis*. – Sirp 25. I 2002.

11 M. Bakhtin, *Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book (1961)*. – M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics. Theory and History of Literature, Volume 8*. Ed. C. Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 287.

12 P. Linnap, *Astu parteisse ja nõua!*, p. 62.

its alienating fisheye effect. The message of *Man and Pine Tree* retains Tooming's previous suspicion towards institutionalised and normalised identities, whether personal or national, religious or political, bourgeois or Soviet, capitalist or communist, but it also speaks of the permanent state of entrapment, providing no positive and viable program of its own.

Summary by author