

# Reflections of Self and Surrounding Circumstances in Priit Pärn's Films *The Triangle* and *Hotel E*

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This article discusses two films by the famous Estonian drawn animation *auteur* Priit Pärn: *The Triangle* (*Kolmnurk*, 1982) and *Hotel E* (*Hotell E*, 1992). The first dissects typical Soviet gender roles within intimate relationships, seen from an ironic, decidedly postmodern angle. The other is a reflection of the shock and identity crisis brought about by the fall of the Iron Curtain. By comparing the two, I am trying to point out the enormity of the paradigmatic shift reflected in them; the complete change of perspective that arrives with the acknowledgement of the new, postsocialist situation.

*The Triangle*, one of Pärn's most accomplished works, which due to the limited distribution it received at the time has remained almost unknown outside of Estonia, is a short (just under 15 minutes) vitriolic comedy. A motif from a popular Estonian folk tale, a small, hungry stranger appearing in a kitchen, begging for a taste of the food and then devouring all of it, is worked into a fable about the possibility of love in the face of dreary everyday life, in a manner that is rather critical towards typical Soviet gender roles. It depicts a married couple, Viktor and Julia, going about their daily lives in their nondescript urban apartment, with Viktor mostly smoking and reading the paper while Julia cooks for him. Their comfortable, if dull, routine is interrupted by a sudden intrusion by Eduard, a seductive stranger seeking Julia's attention and access to the food she cooks. Through depictions of hunger and providing nourishment, the film metaphorically addresses the issues of unmet emotional and physical needs.

It is a rich, impressively executed film, full of creativity and bitter wit, despite mostly dealing with mundane frustrations. The playful, often surreal visuals carry several layers of meaning. The main aspect that I would like to draw attention to here is the subtext of the characters' nationalities and the undercurrent of tension between them based on those nationalities. The film was made during the height of the Brezhnev-era stagnation, when Soviet film censorship was at its strictest, but Pärn still managed to sneak a subtle extra dimension of tension between different nationalities into the film, by communicating it through visual means that were mostly only obvious to Estonian audiences.

The proper, pale-skinned married couple, Viktor and Julia represent the bland

'Everypeople', or average Estonians. Their new neighbour Eduard, with his swarthy skin, dark hair and flashy blue suit, however, is someone who clearly belongs to a different culture. Eduard's otherness is obvious enough to be spotted by foreign audiences; there is anecdotal evidence that in Moscow Eduard was interpreted as being a Georgian and German viewers thought Eduard was Italian. In fact, the film has a number of clues that mark Eduard as specifically Russian, such as the final images of Eduard's own home, with its stereotypically Russian decor (the blue window frames that appear garish to Estonian sensibilities etc.). Eduard's wife Veronika, with her earrings, her hair dyed red and worn in a bun, wearing a flowery dress, also matches the contemporary Estonian understanding of what a typical Russian woman looks like.

In this light, the film takes on a political undertone, telling a story of a Russian man 'invading' an Estonian man's home and taking what is rightfully his: his woman and his food. It can also be interpreted as a politically charged echo of the real-life food shortages in Estonia at the time, caused by the republic being forced to export its produce to the rest of the Soviet Union. (The film does not, however, follow this hidden national agenda as far as depicting Viktor, who eventually manages to seduce his wife, along with her cooking skills, back from Eduard, as anyone remotely heroic.) However, these hints seem to have gone unnoticed by the censors: the main reason why the film was not approved for wider circulation by Goskino was the depiction of Julia, whose appearance and behaviour were scandalously sexual by the standards of Soviet cinema.

The West is only very vaguely present in *The Triangle*, just as it was in the Soviet

daily life at the time: it appears in the background as an unattainable, dreamlike sphere of abundance and beauty, of 'the good things in life', in sync with the common contemporary Estonian habit of regarding Finnish TV as a window to paradise. For example, the imagery of abundant, delicious food, as well as the attractive 'masks' the characters occasionally wear in the film, seem to consist of Western magazine clippings.

*The Triangle* essentially captures a static situation with clear limits; its cycle of repetitions does not really contain any hope for change: as such, this film, made at the height of Brezhnev-era stagnation, is in fact a depiction of stagnation. It also does not question the identity of, or the values held by, Viktor (or Julia, for that matter); none of the characters show any signs of growth or evolving. Eduard is seen in the same somewhat hostile light throughout, as an unwanted intruder.

In comparison to *The Triangle*'s narrow, stagnant world-view, the sheer shock reflected in *Hotel E* a decade later is strikingly evident. *The Triangle* is arguably the better film of the two, although *Hotel E* is twice as long and clearly more ambitious, even coming across as a bit overly so. (This can, however, be explained by the context as, during the crumbling of the Soviet Union, Pärn was urgently seeking to establish a presence in the international animation scene.)

*Hotel E* is an allegorical story, presented in a somewhat more straightforward and more melancholy manner than *The Triangle*. It reflects the shock and confusion of the collapse of communism, Estonia's immediate post-Soviet situation and its attempts to connect with the Western world in the hopes of reintegration. The 'E' in the title stands for Europe, and the film

is inspired by Pärn's own experiences of travelling to film festivals in the West after his previous film *Breakfast on the Grass* (*Eine murul*, 1987) achieved international fame in the wake of perestroika. Thus, *Hotel E* captures the deep sense of alienation of being seen as the 'exotic specimen from the Soviet Union', of coming from a place that seems nightmarish and devastatingly miserable in comparison to the West, and a recognition that in the bigger picture, in fact, the post-Soviet Estonians are the ones who do not belong: they are outsiders, the Other.

This serious, tense film presents a world divided in two: one is a dreamy, colourful, pop-art-influenced vision of a relaxed consumer society, with its inhabitants free of all material worries (in the vein of the American soap operas of the 1980s, avidly watched in northern Estonia via Finnish TV). This stands in stark contrast with the other dimension: a dark, chaotic, dangerous black-and-white world, filled with anxiety and negativity. (The design of this nightmarish dimension is based on Pärn's often surreal, dark and angst-filled drawings and prints.)

*Hotel E*'s protagonist Victor, who is similar to *The Triangle*'s 'Estonian Everyman' Viktor not only in name but also in appearance, originates in this other dimension. He finds a way to move between the two worlds and ventures 'into the West', meaning that now he, the Estonian Everyman, becomes the intruder, the Other, sneaking in and trying to make a place for himself in someone else's territory. His presence in the other room is met with indifference or, at best, vague interest by the locals. At first, Victor is completely confused and appears almost inhuman compared to the locals; he is dazzled by the new world and keeps coming back, slowly

gathering himself, adapting his behaviour to fit in and, in the process, starting to look a bit more like the locals (and thus also more different from the people back in his original dimension). Yet in the West he never looks quite similar enough not to stand out. Also, in the film's melancholy finale, the repetitions and routines of both worlds are revealed to be very alike after all: life in the colourful Western world is just as hollow and meaningless and frustrating, despite looking more appealing and less stressful on the surface. Moreover, at the very end, we can see the wall separating the worlds is breaking down, leaving both to face an uncertain future.

*Hotel E* captures a sudden, acute sense of self-awareness, of one's own otherness as well as a certain sense of a loss of self. The colourful 'Western' dimension appears to be the dominant one and, in comparison to that 'real world', the protagonist's original environment is revealed to be an inconsequential periphery, shaking his identity to the core.

The contrast between the two worlds is enormous: even though Victor can move between the two, he clearly cannot fit into the Western world or prove that he belongs there, even if for a little while there is an element of the naive hope of finding his 'true place' there. The film briefly alludes to Victor possibly being the missing bit that can improve the functioning of the 'Western' world's routines: this seems to be a rare example of Pärn dropping his usual cynicism and reflecting Estonia's desire to re-establish itself as an equal in Europe but, in the end, he seems to conclude it is unlikely. Moreover, Victor's ventures into the other dimension, which expand his perspective on the world, quickly mark him as someone different from everyone else in his original environment, meaning

he soon stops fitting in there as well. (At the time of the making of the film, the privilege of travelling to the West did cause such issues to arise in real life.)

The allegorical representation of all those sentiments reflects the confusion, the crisis of identity, the hopes and fears for the future shared by many Estonians during this era, doing so in a slightly overblown and pretentious, but still rather observant manner. *Hotel E* is remarkable because there are virtually no other Estonian films, either animation or live-action, that directly deal with that particular period of change. This intense and somewhat heavy-handed film was initially met with mixed reactions and was mostly considered to be disappointing after the highly praised *Breakfast on the Grass*. It never achieved the wide popularity enjoyed by Pärn's previous works. However, over time, the perceptiveness and remarkable artistic effort evident in *Hotel E* have earned the film significant critical esteem, both in the local and international context.

*Summary by author*