

Estonian Pop Animation

1973–1979: Hand-Drawn Animation in the Context of Recent Art History

ANDREAS TROSSEK

Summary

This treatment is focused on selected animated films made from 1973 to 1979 in the division of animated cartoons of the studio Tallinnfilm. During the 1970s in the Estonian SSR, a number of artists who were influenced, among other things, by Pop art (and also by *The Yellow Submarine* cartoon from 1968), such as Aili Vint, Leonhard Lapin, Sirje Lapin (Runge), Ando Keskküla, Rein Tammik and Priit Pärn, were actively engaged in the process of making hand-drawn animated films. Although these artistic figures need no introduction in the cultural sphere of today's Estonia, their oeuvre in the field of animation has been left out of the value systems of local post-war art history. However, it is clear that quite a few animations from the 1970s rightly belong in the museal framework of Soviet Estonian Pop, or 'Soviet Pop' as this localized version of Pop art is often referred to.

This article focuses on selected animated films made from 1973 to 1979 in the division of animated cartoons of Tallinnfilm. It was the republic film studio of the Estonian SSR, both supported and controlled by the Goskino, the USSR State Committee for Cinematography. During the 1970s, a number of Estonian artists who were influenced, among other things, by Pop art (and also by The Beatles' famous *The Yellow Submarine* cartoon from 1968), such as Aili Vint, Leonhard Lapin, Sirje Runge, Ando Keskküla, Rein Tammik and Priit Pärn (and also the background artist Kaarel Kurismaa), were actively engaged in the process of making hand-drawn animated films. Although these artistic figures need no introduction in the cultural sphere of today's Estonia, their oeuvre in the field of animation has been left out of the value systems of local post-war art history. However, it is clear that quite a few animations from the 1970s rightly belong in the museal framework of Soviet Estonian Pop, or 'Soviet Pop' as this localized version of Pop art is often referred to. Case studies of *Flight* (1973), *Colour-Bird* (1974), *The Story of Little Rabbit* (1975), *The Rabbit* (1976), *Sunday* (1977) and *Vacuum Cleaner* (1978) are analysed to prove this point, while the films *Is the Earth Round?* (1977) and *...And Plays Tricks* (1979) are discussed in a briefer, illustrative manner. The article is interdisciplinary in its methods and combines interviews, press coverage, archive documents from the Estonian Film Archives and a critical reading of some 'canonical' treatments in recent Estonian art history.

In the attempts to write a de-Sovietized art history in the 1990s, a certain positive quality of 'Pop-likeness' emerged in texts about post-war Estonian art. This has enabled art historians to present some Soviet-era works as atypical and therefore

in opposition to the dominant paradigm of Social Realism. In retrospect, the key-members of the artist groups ANK '64 (Tõnis Vint, Aili Vint, Jüri Arrak, Malle Leis *et al*), *Visarid* (Kaljo Põllu, Rein Tammik, Enn Tegova *et al*) and *SOUP* 69 (Ando Keskküla, Andres Tolts, Leonhard Lapin, Ülevi Eljand *et al*) can be considered to be importers and modifiers of many focal trends from 20th century modern art – Pop art, Op art *etc.* – which at that time represented ideologically disapproved ‘Western tendencies’ in the Soviet Union. Quite a few of those artists were also connected with Tallinnfilm’s cartoon animation unit, which was established in 1971 under the leadership of Rein Raamat. It can even be suggested that hand-drawn animation became sort of a problem-free ‘test field’ for those artistic ideas that couldn’t be fulfilled in the public/official art arena of the Estonian SSR. Animation as a peripheral cultural field worked as an empty space, or empty niche, both between and outside official hierarchies of art. Pop-flavoured imagery and an expressed sense of absurdity didn’t cause problems with the authorities, which, on the other hand, would have been inevitable in the case of an open art exhibition.

Presumably, hand-drawn animation was one of the reasons why the ‘classical’ model of dissident art didn’t work in the Estonian SSR in the 1970s. Indeed, one may ask: why didn’t the first wave of (Soviet) Pop ‘go underground’ at the beginning of the decade? Instead of official exhibition spaces, why didn’t this localized version of Pop move to private apartments, under the artists’ beds or behind their wardrobes, as happened with the ‘non-official’ art scene in Russia? One answer might be that falling back into private spaces simply wasn’t the only solution in the Estonian SSR in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Quite a few

of those individual aesthetic programs loaded with Pop imagery were actually carried out in public space, although in a rather peculiar media – in animation films officially targeted to children.

In 1972 Rein Raamat, a former feature film set designer at studio Tallinnfilm (who had also been engaged in the process of making the first Estonian puppet-film in 1958), directed his first cartoon animation. However, making humorous shorts mostly for children was not exactly what Raamat wanted to do in the long run. He himself had a painter’s diploma and the third release of the studio, entitled *Flight* (1973), featured trendy background art with Op and Pop references by the young painter Aili Vint (a member of ANK '64). The film proved successful, receiving an international festival award, and Raamat continued the pattern of hiring young ambitious artists in order to achieve an artistically up-to-date visual effect. Raamat’s next film, *Colour-Bird* (1974), was, in contrast, a failure to film authorities because the artist-architect Leonhard Lapin (a member of *SOUP* 69) and his then-wife Sirje Lapin (now Runge) were more concerned with the rare possibility of exhibiting the aesthetics of Pop rather than actually illustrating the synopsis of the film. Raamat turned to less visually experimental solutions with the cartoons *The Gothamites* (1974) and *A Romper* (1976), which are noteworthy for their ambivalent artwork by Priit Pärn, already a celebrated caricature artist, who became highly regarded and acknowledged internationally as the leader of the Estonian school of animation within a decade. The ‘Pop paradigm’ was continued in the directorial works of Ando Keskküla (also a member of *SOUP* 69), then the leading figure of Estonian Hyperrealism in official artistic circles. A Pop-influenced design

by Rein Tammik (a member of *Visarid*) was openly expressed in Keskküla's *The Story of Little Rabbit* (1975), whereas *The Rabbit* (1976) was visually a much colder mixture of Pop art, Hyperrealism and photography. After Keskküla left animation for painting, Tammik gave a Pop art look to Avo Paistik's *Vacuum-Cleaner* (1978). The outcome was the second Estonian drawn animation that outraged Goskino, and it was forbidden to show it outside Soviet Estonia. A year earlier, the directorial debut of Pärn, *Is the Earth Round?* (1977), was also limited to republic screens because it was seen as 'too pessimistic'. Pärn as a caricaturist was influenced by Pop art indirectly, yet thoroughly, and that is most visible in his artwork for Paistik's *Sunday* (1977). Pärn's ... *And Plays Tricks* (1979) also stands out as one of the manifestations of the 'yellow-submarine-generation' in the USSR.

Most of these films were considered not very successful as final products in official cinema circles, because in the Soviet Union animation was mainly targeted towards children and teenagers. Here, on the other hand, the artists had clearly used child-oriented cartoons as a means of artistic expression and experimented with the possibilities of the film medium in general (while also alluding to works by sympathetic artists on the screen, adding another layer of inside-jokes), and this created a discrepancy in the films' intended audiences.

In terms of interpretation models that are considered valid in the recent art history of Estonia, it is fair to state that at the beginning of the 1970s, and foremost via Pop-like imagery, the aesthetics of the 'non-official' or ideologically inadvisable segments of local artistic culture was sublimated or flew into the field of hand-drawn animation. By the end of the decade, and through quasi-conflicts and semi-

compromises with Soviet film authorities, this development also ended (additionally, the aesthetics of Pop also became more and more visible in the official art scene of the Estonian SSR in the late 1970s). This process lasted no more than five or six years, yet it paradoxically produced probably the first and purest forms of Pop art in the public sphere of the Estonian SSR. Although undoubtedly there were more mechanisms of Soviet film bureaucracy than rules of local art life behind the process of making these animations, one thing is clear: by gradually shifting the focus from recent film history to recent art history, the true value of Estonian Pop animation of the 1970s becomes apparent – they appear as fragmented manifestations of post-World War II youth culture that also filtered into the 'wrong side' of the Iron Curtain.

*Summary by author
proof-read by Richard Adang*