

Postcommunist Estonian Cinema as Transnational Cinema

EWA MAZIERSKA

The article considers Estonian films made after the collapse of communism as examples of transnational cinema. It draws on Steven Vertovec's idea of transnationalism as pertaining to 'diaspora consciousness', marked by dual or multiple identifications and loyalties, arguing that the characters populating the films in hand absorb various influences, indulge in hybridised styles and identify themselves by other types of loyalties than those resulting from sharing the same national heritage. The essay discusses films both in the past and in the present, such as *Men at Arms* (2005, directed by Kaaren Kaer), *All My Lenins* (1997, directed by Hardi Volmer) and *Revolution of Pigs* (2004, directed by Jaak Kilmi and René Reinumägi), *The Highway Crossing* (1999, directed by Arko Okk), *Set Point* (2004, directed by Ilmar Taska) and *An Affair of Honour* (1999, directed by Valentin Kuik).

The article considers Estonian films made after the collapse of communism as examples of transnational cinema. Its premise is that films can be regarded as national and transnational at the same time. The perception of national or transnational character of film is largely a derivative of the native or touristic experience of the researcher. Not being a native Estonian and never living in the country, the author of this essay is thus particularly prone to using a transnational approach. Estonian films can be regarded as transnational also due to their textual specificities. To demonstrate this point, the author draws on the concept of 'transnationalism', as elucidated by Steven Vertovec, who in his article 'Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism', maintains that 'transnationalism' refers to multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states, such as ethnic diasporas, and social networks transcending geographical boundaries, facilitated by modern technologies, such as the Internet. These networks allow the recreation of national cultures on foreign soil and enable the creation of forms of solidarity and identity that do not depend on the appropriation of space. Another understanding of transnationalism, discussed by Vertovec, is that of 'diaspora consciousness', marked by dual or multiple identifications and loyalties. Those who possess such consciousness might feel simultaneously 'here and there', connected to their neighbours, but also maintaining strong ties with those living somewhere else. Thirdly, 'transnationalism' can be perceived as a mode of cultural reproduction. In this sense it is associated with the fluidity of social institutions and everyday practices, which are often described

in terms of creolisation, bricolage, cultural translation and hybridity.¹

Vertovec argues that the idea of transnationalism is so widely used today because the aforementioned phenomena pertain to a large proportion of contemporary people. The citizens of Estonia are no different in this respect. They are even in the vanguard of these processes thanks to their above-average use of the Internet and being regarded as the least religious society in the world. In addition, Estonia lends itself to transnational treatment thanks to its position as a border state, its smallness in terms of surface area and population, and dependence on international organisations to ensure its sovereignty.²

A large proportion of Estonian films, made after the Soviet Union collapsed, invite us to see Estonia and its inhabitants as nationally and culturally 'impure', absorbing various influences, indulging in hybridised styles and identifying themselves by other types of loyalties than those resulting from sharing the same national heritage, or simply not showing any national characteristics, being somewhat, from national perspective, 'neutered'. These films also testify to their transnationalism, due to employing what can be described as 'postmodern style', marked by, among other features, extensive use of quotation and affinity to stylisation. Equally, they do not address exclusively Estonian viewers, but international audiences as well, which is testified by a strong presence of Estonian films at

European film festivals and the fact that they are routinely subtitled in English.

The essay discusses two aspects of transnationalism in Estonian films. Firstly, the representation of Estonia and Estonians as culturally in-between, at the cross-roads, typically situated between East and West. This section focuses on films set in the past. The second part concerns films set in the present, arguing that the stories they tell come across as universal, rather than country-specific.

The first part analyses *Men at Arms* (2005, directed by Kaaren Kaer), *All My Lenins* (1997, directed by Hardi Volmer) and *Revolution of Pigs* (2004, directed by Jaak Kilmi and René Reinumägi). These films depict Russian and Soviet colonisation of Estonia, simultaneous attempts to conquer the country from the West, Estonian resistance to Russian/Soviet pressure by appropriating elements of Western culture or balancing the pressures from the East and the West in a bid to forge a distinct national identity. A symptomatic example of this trend is *Men at Arms*. Set at the beginning of the thirteenth century, the film refers to the Livonian Crusade: the German and Danish conquest, the purpose of which was to colonise and christianise the territories of modern Latvia and Estonia, and to the resistance of the colonising forces by Estonians under Lembitu of Lehola, the chieftain of Sakala county. However, rather than representing the story of Lembitu and his people according to the patriotic tradition, which underscores nationalism and bravery of its protagonists, Kaer offers its subversive version. He replaces the Estonian 'grand narrative' by a series of overlapping and conflicting 'mini-narratives', which subvert its simplicity and question its nationalistic character. National stereotypes in this film

1 S. Vertovec, *Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism*. – *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1999, vol. 22 (2), pp. 447–462.

2 G. Feldman, *Shifting the Perspective on Identity Discourse in Estonia*. – *Journal of Baltic Studies* 2000, vol. 31 (4), pp. 406–428.

are exaggerated, in order to undermine each nation represented and, in a wider sense, to make fun of nationalistic virtues, such as courage, honour and the will to defend one's country at any price. Moreover, rather than focusing on German–Estonian conflict, Kaer complicates the historical scene by representing the period of the crusade as a time of competition of different nations and ethnic groups for European as well as regional and national domination.

Apart from Germans, who want to colonise Estonia due to their sheer ambition to be the leader of Europe, there are also the French, who have an insatiable appetite for tasty Estonian frogs, and even Mongolians, revealing their *Drang nach Westen* drive, despite not knowing where is the West. There is also talk of Russians who are all too willing to help their neighbours to free themselves from the clutches of foreign invaders but, of course, at the price of being involved in their future affairs. Estonia itself is not a passive victim of these colonising attempts but has ambitions of its own to be a leader of the Baltic region. Moreover, Estonians, as seen by Kaer, are not a homogenous nation, but a collection of different ethnic groups, each speaking a different language and enjoying its own way of life. It is worth adding in passing that this was the case with most peoples which later created what we know as specific European nations, such a German, Russian or French. Hence, these people, at the time when *Men at Arms* are set, did not have any natural 'national identity'; it had to be inculcated in them and, paradoxically but inevitably, this role was appropriated by those, like Lembitu, who were semi-foreigners and outsiders.

The mosaic of competing interests, presented by Kaer, brings to mind the

conflicts within the European Community, which Estonia joined about the time *Men at Arms* was produced. The parallel between old and new times is made explicit in the film, when one of the characters says 'This is like the European Union'. Lembitu himself can be regarded as a man who understands the intricacies of political operations in a globalised world and attempts to exploit them to the advantage of his small country. In particular, he is aware that Estonia cannot win on its own terms and be entirely sovereign. Its only way to succeed is by tempering its nationalistic ambitions and balancing various external pressures.

The second part analyse films in which the national background of the characters is rendered insignificant, and their decisions are motivated by values which are transcultural and can broadly be described as postmodern. This trend is reflected especially in love/romantic stories which constitute more than half of Estonian films set in the present. This tendency is exemplified by *The Highway Crossing* (1999, directed by Arko Okk), *Set Point* (2004, directed by Ilmar Taska) and *An Affair of Honour* (1999, directed by Valentin Kuik). The universal character of Okk's film, epitomising this trend, is conveyed by its very story, which is a modern re-working of the popular fairy tale about the fisherman and the golden fish who grants him three wishes. Okk, however, does not attempt to 'Estonise' this fairy tale, but leave it as bare as possible. The film is set in the countryside, among the woods and near the lake but the landscape looks indistinct; it might be Russian, German or Danish, as well as Estonian. The director also deliberately withdraws from the viewer any information about the background of his characters. We do

not know where they started their journey or where are they heading to. The values and aspirations its characters reveal are by no means specific to any geopolitical formation, but are typical for postmodern people, being, by and large, of a material nature. Testimony to their consumerist identity is their defining themselves by what they possess and their obsession with images. *The Highway Crossing* also reveals a postmodern style, marked by references to film noir, such as *Laura* and *Twin Peaks* and *Dogme 95* productions.

The essay concludes by claiming that considering Estonian cinema as transnational cinema inevitably raises questions about the country's national identity, past and present. Equally, it allows and encourages comparison of Estonian films with others made in different places and times. The consequence of such comparison is a perception that Estonian cinema is in dialogue with world and, especially, European cinema, but is equally able to speak with its own voice; that it not only draws on cinema as a pan-national institution, but also contributes to it. The main challenge is to make this contribution visible.

Summary by author