

MEDIEVAL SOCIALIST REALISM: Representations of Tallinn Old Town in Soviet Estonian Feature Films, 1969–1972*

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The Old Town of Tallinn acquired its look, much of which has been preserved to our days, mainly in the 13th–15th centuries, and it has always been an attractive source of imagery for visual media. The 1960s and 1970s were a remarkable period in the history of its representation, when the Old Town and the wider subject of the Middle Ages suddenly became extraordinarily topical in both academic circles and mass culture and inspired an array of visual as well as literary texts. This nostalgic and romantic ‘medieval trend’ materialised in countless articles of consumer goods, numerous interior designs and in a whole range of films. The two Estonian film studios – Tallinnfilm and Eesti Telefilm – produced a considerably large number of concert films, documentaries, travel films and city symphonies representing the Old Town during these two decades, when compared with the production numbers of the 1950s or the 1980s. This trend, however, is especially clear and concentrated in feature films: of the twenty or so ‘scenics’ that were produced in 1969–1972, around a quarter were based on the images of the Old Town.¹ This article attempts to reflect upon the ambivalent and sometimes even paradoxical representations of the Old Town and the often conflicting layers of signification related to such enthusiasm about the Middle Ages. It also aims to look into the different modes of representation of the Old Town’s cityscape and landmarks.

1. Frozen views: fragments, monuments, panoramas

In 1925, Le Corbusier wrote in his notes to *Plan Voisin*: ‘the *Voisin* scheme will

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¹ E.g. *The Last Relic* (*Võimne reliikvia*, director Grigori Kromanov, Tallinnfilm, 1969), *Old Thomas Was Stolen* (*Varastati Vana Toomas*, director Semjon Školnikov, Tallinnfilm, 1970), *Between Three Plagues* (*Kolme katku vabel*, director Virve Aruoja, Eesti Telefilm, 1970), *Don Juan in Tallinn* (*Don Juan Tallinnas*, director Arvo Kruusement, Tallinnfilm, 1971), *Stone of Blood* (*Verekiivi*, director Madis Ojamaa, Tallinnfilm, 1972).

isolate the whole of the ancient city and bring back peace and calm from Saint Gervais to Etoile ... in that way the past will become no longer dangerous to life, but finds its true place in it' (quoted in Kahn 1992: 24). This idea has with excellent subtle irony been visualised by Jacques Tati in his film *Playtime* (1967), set in Paris where in the course of modernisation, nothing has been left of the old city but some iconic objects, such as the Eiffel Tower, the Place de la Concorde and the Place de l'Etoile. The camera catches them only as ephemeral glimpses of unattainable reflections on the glass surfaces of the new city, like carefully preserved museum exhibits. A similar mode of representation is also characteristic of the 'story with songs' *Old Thomas Was Stolen*, made in Tallinnfilm in 1970, where the sights of Tallinn Old Town are exhibited as detached fragments, a row of perfect glossy snapshots.

The foundations of such a monument-based way of seeing and representation had already been established some time at the end of the 18th century, when the power discourse of the emerging national states appropriated the rich heritage of historical architecture. This would, along with contemporary monuments, cement the sense of emerging collective identity, and be the means of constructing communal memory, legitimising the power and cultural continuity of these states. In the course of the 19th century, the historical substance met with the force of an industrialising and urbanising society, creating an urgent need to protect the monuments and to guarantee their further preservation as central triggers of national unity. The preservers and restorers of historical heritage were working for this purpose all over Europe, and receiving substantial financial aid from their respective states. Using Svetlana Boym's definition of restorative and reflective nostalgia, the practice of protecting historical heritage that serves this need to represent the state powers and specify identities, can be classified as restorative nostalgia. 'Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstruction of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time.' (Boym 2001: 41.) Restorative nostalgia is characterised by its attempt to establish objective truth about the past, which, however, means the colonisation of the past in the interest of the present. Restorative nostalgia strives to spatialise time, to halt its continuity in the form of a perfect and eternal still, lacking all signs of decay, where the original and authentic appearance of its object has not changed (Boym 2001: 41, 49–50).

Hence, at the birth of modernism, urban space was in a sense frozen. Special attention from the authorities and heritage protectors to specific historical buildings also meant the fragmentation of the urban fabric into a number of singular objects, which, in the capitalist system, acquired in addition to their previous cult value a market value (Linnap 2003: 436), and the city became 'seen as a complex of tourist sights' (Groys 2004: 85). The tourism industry in its turn amplified the symbolic value of national historical monuments – according to Boris Groys 'only tourism itself creates these monuments ... , makes the city into a monument – the continuously flowing and changing routine of the city becomes a monumental image of eternity only under the eyes of a tourist, who passes through this city' (Groys 2004: 85–86). I believe, however, that the state/national aspect should not be undervalued here, meaning the local initiative as the initial drive in the process of creating sights, since in Western Europe at least, it is the eye of the local inhabitant that makes the first selection. This idea is confirmed by Dean MacCannell's so-called sacralisation model of tourist attractions, where the sights pass through five phases (see MacCannell 1999: 44–45). The first phase is the naming phase, which is often preceded by careful preparations to prove the value of the objects: the objects are examined under x-rays, they are photographed and studied by specialists, and their aesthetic, monetary, historical, social and recreational value is determined. MacCannell calls the second phase of the sacralisation process the phase of framing and elevation of the object. This is followed by the phase of enshrinement, which is achieved when the frame of the object itself enters the first phase of sacralisation. MacCannell names the Sainte Chapelle in Paris as a classical example of this phase. The chapel was built by Saint Louis to be the 'container' for the 'true Crown of Thorns'. In the first three phases, the objects are mostly under the attention of scholars, heritage protectors and restorers. The fourth phase is the phase of the so-called mechanical reproduction, where the objects are reproduced in the form of posters, photos, models or other images, which are valued and exhibited in their own right. This is the phase that elevates the sights into the sphere of interest of the tourism industry. The sacralisation process is completed with the phase of social reproduction, where the cities or regions start calling themselves after their famous tourist attractions.

The mechanical reproduction carried out in the fourth phase raises the question of the ways of representing architecture. The monument-based approach to urban space discussed above, which breaks that space into abstract and isolated

fragments, is directly related to the way of representing architecture, deep-rooted in tourist guide books and photo albums, which was transferred into the 'kaleidoscopic' (Linnap 2002: 244) forms of film art serving the ends of tourism marketing (the most obvious example could be the travel film, but this phenomenon can be found in any other genre as well). Such an approach is usually characterised by superficiality, conscious and intentional detachment of objects, buildings or segments of urban space from routine practices, turning them into 'museum pieces', breaking them off from their context and memory and stereotyping them. Edward Relph (1976: 80–87) calls such touristic² 'sense of place' *inauthentic* and false, embodying interrelations with the environment that proceed from uncritical adoption of widespread popular conceptions, and opposes it with authentic, deep, direct and pure sense of place. Although the way of representation that breaks the urban fabric into objects causes the creation of a glossy and one-dimensional wishful reality within the tourist discourse, having no connections whatsoever with the many faces of the real cityscape, the same fragmentary way of sensing and representation could, however, give a diametrically opposed result, which is *authentic*³, in the sense of Relph's term. For instance, Dziga Vertov creates in his film *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) a fragmentary cityscape from a sequence of isolated stills of monumental architecture and monuments, which does not articulate into a recognisable geographical unity. On the montage table, he constructs 'a playful vision of a city that cannot be mapped' (Widdis 2003: 226). He observes the environment from a peripheral, not a central position, and thus creates a vision of a non-hierarchised space (Widdis 2003: 225–226). It is worth emphasising that Vertov's cityscape is living and inhabited by people, but

² Relph's term a *tourist*, whose non-authentic sense of place is opposed to local inhabitant's deep and authentic sense of place, should not be taken here as an evaluative and personified term, but rather as a general notion denoting certain characteristic relations with the environment, i.e. a local inhabitant could also well be characterised by a touristic sense of place. The same stands for the ways of representation derived from these relations with the environment: it has already been mentioned that any touristic representation points out, first of all, the local preferences and self-image, and shows how the locals want to present themselves to the world.

³ It should be mentioned that Relph's notion of authenticity cannot be confused with the notion of authenticity found in Boym's text. The latter denotes the way of restoration, which considers important the preservation of a construction's authentic appearance at the expense of minimising the value and destructing of all later historical layers. In such a way this idea is actually in opposition with Relph's conception, which considers such reconstruction of history or making it a museum exhibit as one form of inauthentic sense of place (see Relph 1976: 101).

the visual images that are meant to appeal to tourists are often desolate and the monuments stand in a proud but lonely void.

Vertov's approach is opposed to another great canon of pictorial representation, established in the representation of landscapes by white Western photographers in the 19th century, such as Francis Frith, William Henry Jackson, Timothy O'Sullivan and others, who photographed exotic far-away places mainly in the Near East, but also in remote uninhabited places in America. This canon is characterised by panoramic and sweeping shots that offer fleeting and superficial glimpses on the objects from a great distance in bright sunlight (Linnap 2003: 437). The most genuine example is, naturally, the bird's eye view – a look that maps, organises and abstracts the environment and by doing so, also controls it. This angle was most attractive for the modernists of the 1920s and 1930s, since the aerial perspective enabled them to realise one of their main architectural ambitions – to make the city easily readable (see, e.g., Frisby 2002), or, to be more precise, it allowed them a perceptive simulation of the achievement of this goal. At the same time, Sergei Tretyakov, a member of the Russian avant-garde art movement of the 1920s, LEF, remarked that aerial views created proprietary relations and a consumer relationship between the landscape and the viewer, and the viewer was deprived of the chance to acquire the empirical 'knowledge' (quoted in Widdis 2003: 236). Michel de Certeau also believes that aerial view is a way of representing the space that controls, excludes active participation and suggests alienation (see, e.g., de Certeau 1988); it sacrifices 'the sensing of immediate details of city life' and 'contributes towards the objectification of the city' (Shields 2004: 153). Although the Russian avant-gardists of the 1920s considered the bird's eye perspective an unsuitable method for Soviet art, it was quite freely used in the Soviet visual arts from the 1930s on. On the one hand, this point of view demonstrated and emphasised the magnificence of both the old and new architectural ensembles, but on the other hand, speculating with the idea, it has been argued that the bird's eye perspective was a means of establishing a new conception of home – the huge Soviet 'homeland' instead of a small home – and reflected the state's attempt to break people off from their most intimate territory – their 'nest' (Bachelard 1970: 92–104; see Linnap 2002: 243). Thus it cultivated a way of existence – the collective existence – which played an important role in constructing the identity of *Homo sovieticus*, suppressed the 'bourgeois' desire for individualism and, striving for the illusion of the uniform Soviet country, cancelled local specific features.

2. The case of Tallinn Old Town

For almost two centuries, Baltic Germans, Estonians and Soviets have all actively studied Tallinn Old Town as a historical monument and as a complex of architectural monuments, focusing on its representation in visual culture as well as in written media, and attempting to understand and interpret it in both scholarly research and in more popular formats. However, a collection of texts was accumulated in the Soviet time, in the 1960s and 1970s, whose ontological and semantic configuration seems to be of an extremely intriguing nature. The Soviet occupation created a cultural situation which, on the one hand, allowed the integration of the Old Town as an ancient German citadel into the local national identity, helping the Estonians to finally adopt the heritage of the one-time colonisers, and even to make it a *locus* of national *résistance* (Kalm 2001: 425, 432). On the other hand, besides building its own monuments, the Soviet power did not neglect the opportunity to dress up in borrowed plumes from the history of Russia as well as of all Soviet republics, following the Stalinist thesis ‘socialist form, national content’ by craftily weaving the material crust of the seemingly ideologically conflicting heritage of the Old Town into the international cultural texture of the Soviet Union,⁴ by recoding its meanings and transforming its functions, by harnessing it into the service of Soviet propaganda. Another important fact is that the Old Town was switched into the mechanisms of foreign economy; it was transformed into a tourism product proper, drawing in hard currency, which was vitally necessary for participating in international economy. Paradoxically, the basis for developing the Old Town into a genuine tourist attraction, for making it a spectacular ‘themed environment’ (see Debord 1995; Gottdiener 2001) that would suppress the subject’s creativity and blur his sense of reality was laid under the conditions of socialist society. This project is being developed even further and with enthusiasm in the newly re-independent Estonia. The ‘medieval trend’ has thus developed into a meeting place, but more precisely, into a place of adaptation, for conflicting interests and identities; the soup prepared in this pot of culture was equally tasty for both the occupants and the occupied.

⁴ The decree legalising the recording and preservation of cultural resources in Soviet Union was adopted already in 1918.

2.1. From research to reproduction: sacralising Old Town

To illustrate the structuralising of such interest in the Middle Ages as a many-featured and even conflictual phenomenon, and to schematise it in a sense, I am going to apply Dean MacCannell's model of sacralising tourist attractions, since it makes it easier to apprehend the inner development lines and logic of the phenomenon. It also helps to incorporate diverse elements ranging from scholarly research to popular culture into the discussion.⁵

Scholarly research in the Old Town by specialists corresponds to the first phase of MacCannell's model. In 1950, the Scientific Restoration Workshop was established at the State Department of Architecture, uniting researchers, practical designers and drafters. It is necessary to point out that 'scientific restoration' was the main principle of Soviet heritage protection, which generally meant the restoration of the buildings' authentic, original shape and the removal of all later layers.⁶ Scientific method was supposed to guarantee the arrival at the objective, necessarily ideologically suitable and administratively controlled 'truth', which, in its turn, led to the denial of certain historical layers and often to the mutilation of the monuments.⁷ Such attitude is an example *par excellence* to Boym's 'restorative nostalgia': the many faces of the past and the faded charm of history are thoughtlessly destroyed in the temporary interests of the present and for the construction of a new illusory collective identity and false memory.

⁵ It should be mentioned that MacCannell's conception can rather universally be applied in explaining the functional logic of tourist industry in any capitalist society (or in any society with similar mechanisms of functioning, including the Soviet Union). But I believe that when talking about Tallinn Old Town, this model is most adequate precisely in the case of the Soviet period, because just then, the connections between the scientific research performed in the first phase and the mechanical reproduction phase were most direct and the range of art forms in the fourth phase was wider than never before or after, especially in the wider context of contemporary visual culture.

⁶ In Estonia, the Soviet rhetoric of scientific restoration was widely used in newspaper discussions, but in practice, the most preferred method was 'conservation with partial restoration as the most respectful and neutral way of fixing up old buildings, which would rule out wrong solutions' (Tamm 1984: 11). It is true that in some cases the authentic original style (Gothic) was revealed from under later additions: for instance, the Town Hall, the Town Prison, one of the Town Wall towers Neitsitorn and other objects (see, e.g., Tamm 1984: 22, 26–27, 29).

⁷ 'Before deciding questions of renovation of actual losses, one must decide questions of stratified depositions; that is, one must thoroughly investigate which in the existing conglomeration of multifarious elements are genuine, authentic and most valuable, which are accidental or neutral, and which are false, borrowed or foreign, which came hither from another world of aesthetic ideals,

In Tallinn's case, the second phase of the sacralisation process could include the campaign of 'labelling' the individual objects listed as historical monuments, which began in the late 1940s, and was meant to establish the 'minimum exhibition' (see, e.g. Üprus 1955). The maximum exhibition should have embodied the city as a museum.⁸ On the one hand, the adoption of this idea was related to the efforts of local restorers and art historians to preserve the Old Town as a complex in a situation where the modernist urban development, striving for effectiveness, was threatening to sacrifice the winding streets and picturesque milieu of the old city centre to an efficient traffic system and break a path for a new main road straight through the Old Town. On the other hand, the 'museumisation' of city meant also a change in the function of the city, favoured by the new regime, where the everyday spatial practices are replaced by a frozen museum exhibition. The old meanings and symbolic codes are cancelled, the authentic sense of the place falls back and is replaced by placelessness, pure reactions and experiences are muted (Relph 1976: 80). In 1970, the film *Old Thomas Was Stolen* recorded, among other things, the mounting of the steel framework of the steeple of St. Nicholas church, which had been destroyed in the World War II. At first, there were plans to convert St. Nicholas church into a museum of scientific atheism in the religion-hostile Soviet Estonia, but as the restoration stretched over more than twenty years, the church opened in 1984 as a museum of old art and as a concert hall. In such a way, the removal of this construction from everyday use

from another non-popular, artistic culture, which enveloped the authentic architecture of the monument with alien decorative orders and which do not possess intrinsic merit. In short, before starting renewal of losses, one must precisely define what indeed must be renewed, what must be religiously preserved and carefully restored, what may be retained temporarily, or with certain reservations, and what not only must not be saved and even less restored, but on the contrary must be removed as alien and destructive of the authentic form of the monument.' (Opolovnikov 1974: 7; quoted in French 1995: 191.)

⁸ Heritage protection started to treat the heart of the city as a complex monument all over Europe after World War II; legislation was introduced to guarantee their preservation in France and Italy, for example, in the 1960s (Boyer 1994: 382). In Tallinn, a state protection zone was established in the Old Town in 1966, being a novel move in the whole Soviet Union. When in Western Europe it was soon realised that the luxuriously restored city centres were under the threat of becoming frozen museums, which had already happened with several French small towns (Boyer 1994: 383), then in Tallinn Old Town the idea of the museum city persisted even in the 1980s, and only then, in the changed conditions of the postmodernist perception of architecture and environment, the problems related to everyday practices became actual and regeneration became topical (see, e.g., Heidmets 1983: 16–17).

was not brought to its radical end, but nevertheless, the church no longer fulfilled its original sacral function.⁹ It was pushed into the marginal zone of the social arena, into the realm of art, which operated according to the canon of socialist realism – ‘national form, socialist content’ – and as such should have been, at least in theory, controlled by the authorities.¹⁰ The fact that an ideological hole in this dogma proved to be bigger than the initially planned valve for releasing the steam of national tensions and in the situation where political opposition was impossible and the sphere of culture, being on a marginal position in society, enabled to organise resistance to the governing forces (see, e.g., Lauristin, Vihalemm 1997: 74), is altogether another matter.

The general idea of metalevel from the third phase of MacCannell’s model could be adopted to locate the promotion of the historical heritage of the Old Town in the press and in other publications. The points of view and the general attitude expressed in this discussion had certain common features with the mass reproduction of the images of the Old Town that took place in the fourth phase. For instance, due to limited resources, the real restoration work during the whole period was focussed on single ‘gem objects’ (Town Hall, St. Nicholas’ church, the Fat Margareete cannon tower, the ensemble of Three Sisters, etc.) and the press quite actively reflected these activities, which in some cases stretched over several decades, creating a so-called cult of façades in the consciousness of the masses. It was clearly reflected in official representative photo albums and (travel) films, but also in other visual media aimed at the tourism industry, and it corresponded to the canons of photographing architecture developed in the 19th century (described above), which had been followed by the ‘men with movie cameras’ during the tsarist era, and in the Estonian Republic of the interwar period. The repertoire of the ways of representing the Old Town, especially the choice of shooting locations, the so-called object menu, remained quite constant throughout the course of time. For example, the church steeples that dominate the city

⁹ The film *Old Thomas Was Stolen* represents the Dome church straight as a museum. The camera passes the coats of arms on the church walls as if they were beautiful objects in an art collection. Ancient weather vanes and numerous pseudo-medieval ‘advertising signs’ (a metal boot, jug, pretzel) and other objects are presented in just a similar key.

¹⁰ Ideally, the research carried out in museums should have, of course, resulted in a new approach to history, suitable for the regime, and the ‘national form’ should have been filled with ‘socialist content’. Museums were also shouldered with a ‘responsible burden’ of ideological education of the people, to adapt a cliché of the period.

vistas have always been focal points in the composition of panoramic views, and certain single objects, street sections and details have always been the most loved images. But it should be stressed that in the Soviet period, an extremely tendentious and strictly regulated canon of representing Tallinn became dominant, and these motifs can be seen in an entirely new light in the context of this canon. Only a few certain buildings of the Old Town belonged to the accepted official menu of façades, and they were seconded by the recently erected modernist constructions. All constructional strata, with the exception of newly restored Gothic and the post-WWII modernism were eliminated from the representations of the cityspace. The Old Town was reduced to a so-called intentional memorial, to use a notion coined by Alois Riegl (Riegl 1982, quoted in Boym 2001: 78), to an eternally young monument fulfilling the didactic tasks given by the authorities – to a space of restorative nostalgia. All zones that exhibited any signs of wear, and of the many faces and controversies of history, and all morally and materially aged zones were removed from the lexicon of representation, because the spaces that demonstrated mortality and randomness threatened the selective and embellished reconstruction of history (Boym 2001: 78–79). For example, up to the mid-1980s it was prohibited to represent the wooden houses of the slums in photos and films, and the showing of the architectural heritage of the Estonian Republic, as well as the ‘architectural exaggerations’ from the Stalinist period was often avoided. The non-representative life in neglected backyards and worn-out patios behind the corners, which were hidden behind the polished façades of the Old Town, was censored. The image of the museum town was singularly medieval, leaving the architectural strata of the later periods out of the official menu of objects.

The preference of medieval projections could, on the one hand, be explained by the temporal distance of the period, which made it easier to manipulate symbolic codes. On the other hand, the anonymity of the medieval architecture fitted well with the Leninist thesis ‘art belongs to people’, enabling its inclusion, without much pain, into the narrative of socialist egalitarianism. In addition to that, an important fact is that seemingly, the need for the suppression of national identity was absent here, because Estonians had not been able to ‘monumentalise’ the Middle Ages in their collective memory before the onslaught of the Soviets, since they had been engaged in erecting new national monuments of their own. Therefore, the colonisation of the Old Town for the creation of a Soviet self-im-

age was relatively easy. Still another matter is that, paradoxically, together with the 'Sovietisation' of the medieval architecture, a totally opposite process was going on: the locals discovered the Old Town as a tactical means of opposing the imported Soviet culture.

2.2. Socialism and spectacle

It has already been noted that the image of the Old Town was woven into the Soviet international cultural texture on the looms of the Stalinist dogma 'national form, socialist content'. I have to admit that the parallel between the 'medieval trend' and the socialist realist canon could be rather unexpected, but on closer observation, it is not as arbitrary as it may seem. The comparatively painless incorporation of the Old Town into the socialist realist canon was enabled by the generality of the postulated rules and tasks. Since the present article does not allow for a detailed analysis of these rules and tasks, I shall only give some examples. The fact that socialist realism defined the national form as a 'living and growing historically developing phenomenon' (Taev 1945) lent elasticity to the whole conception and allowed the representation, besides the pseudo-ethnographical images of wooden beer mugs and national costume, of lancets, finials and perspective portals as national forms. These are simply the respectively rural and urban aspects expressing the 'psychical character' of one and the same nation (Taev 1945). The sign system of socialist realism validated the Gothic style primarily because of an intentionally constructed myth of anonymity of the medieval building art, which automatically classified it among the popular, and thereby progressive, expressions of form. At the same time, the Middle Ages were in correspondence with the requirement for typicality: Gothic was set forth as the most characteristic element dominating the appearance of the Old Town, although it was actually not true – of all periods of style, Classicism was statistically most numerous represented there (Üprus 1967). The museumised Old Town was set up to fulfil the most important task of socialist realism, defined in the statute of the Soviet Writers' Union established in 1934, 'ideological reshaping and re-education of working people in the spirit of socialism' (quoted in Sarapik 2003: 116).

Probably the most outstanding feature of socialist realism in pictorial representation is the construction of a falsely positive pseudo-reality, full of pathos, and the use of stereotyped characters, situations and solutions. The representation

of the Old Town in the visual images of the Soviet time is, too, characterised by its picture postcard-like mode of representation, the tendentious and selective recording of its features, and the creation of illusory spatial relations that deform the reality. Stereotyped views are repeated from an album to an album and from a film to a film. Positive and optimistic mood is suggested by bright sunshine, never hidden behind the clouds, which would also never set. Feature films are made livelier with popular music and all stories have a happy ending. These simple (pseudo)historical stories enacted against the background of the picturesque Old Town always contain some kind of a didactic and moralising message for the modern time, realising thus two major points of the socialist realist canon: art has to be didactic and exhibit substantial relations with contemporary times.

While on the one hand, the motifs of Tallinn Old Town were embodied into socialist realism and the 'medieval trend' reflected the ideological ambitions of the Soviet power in (re)constructing the past, making the present heroic and constituting the future, on the other hand, the Old Town was also dragged onto the commercial merry-go-round of the tourism industry and entertainment business. In the actual city space, the merchandising of the Old Town was most clearly testified to by numerous places of entertainment that had been built into the cellars and towers. Although these establishments did indeed help to save old buildings from further decay and put the neglected town centre into better order, they can still be treated as an ultimate expression of the society of spectacle, described by the leading figure of Situationists, Guy Debord (see Debord 1995). For Debord, the spectacle is a means of pacifying and depoliticising society, and it spreads its narcotic influence via cultural mechanisms connected with entertainment. It suppresses the undesirable energy of an active subject and creates a passive individual who is chained by his/her (consumer) appetites and manipulated as a toy of the powers. The Soviet power had similar aims, and its Stalinist repressive apparatus was replaced by much more refined, but still no less repressive strategies of influencing its citizens in the 1960s and 1970s. In shaping *Homo sovieticus*, the Soviets did not disdain the copying of effective mechanisms of manipulation from capitalism, and the more hidden nature of these made it much more difficult to resist the so-called creeping Sovietisation. The modern restaurants and bars in Tallinn – Vana Toomas (Old Thomas, completed in 1960), Tallinn (1967–1968), Karoliina (1967–1968), and others –, as well as restored inns in the country – Koeru (1960–1965), Audru (1970–1977), and Viitna (1978),

windmills-coffee bars in Kuressaare (1970–1974) and Adavere – were extremely popular places of entertainment, where the energy, which otherwise would have taken people to barricades, was channelled without any danger to the powers into satisfying people’s bodily needs and thirst for gossip. These establishments that had been restored in a national-ethnographical or ‘Gothic’-rustic key can also be observed as themed environments, characteristic of the emerging consumer society, as single actually realised parts of a larger system of the Old Town as a theme park (on themed environments see Gottdiener 2001). In both the East and the West, the thematically organised space offered nostalgic refreshment of mind, being an alternative to the modern, anonymous and alienated environment, and the opportunity to escape the rough reality, whether capitalist or socialist; at the same time it also served the ends of the society of spectacle by dulling its subjects. Its effect could easily have been even stronger in the East, since the consumer society was here also the society of short supply, and the limited opportunities intensified unsatisfied desires. Still, it has to be pointed out that due to poor financing, the project of turning the Old Town into a theme park was not completed during the Soviet time, and remaining a real environment, it retained its psycho-geographical characteristics.

2.3. Modes of resistance and adaptation

It has already been mentioned that in spite of having been initiated by the Soviets, enthusiasm about the Old Town also contained the local ambition of being culturally different, and in the spheres of heritage protection and restoration it had a clearer undertone of national *résistance*. But having become a nostalgic and romantic mass ‘medieval trend’, it rather acquired the tone of adaptation and corresponded with Soviet cultural values.

Heritage protection gave the occupied small nation¹¹ an opportunity to engage in the study of local history and to preserve its cultural memory under the shade of Soviet rhetoric, to stress (and to preserve) its belonging into the

¹¹ Actually, the Soviet conception of heritage protection gave a similar opportunity to protect national, and especially, religious heritage and together with this, also cultural memory, in Russia as well, where Nikita Khrushchev organised a campaign to close and destroy churches in 1959–1964. In reaction to this, an All-Russian Society for the Preservation of Cultural and Historical Monuments (Russian acronym VOPIK) was created in 1966. Remarkable growth in its membership testified the people’s huge support to the revitalisation of the historical memory

European, not Russian cultural realm, and by this, also, to stress the unjust and violent intervention of the Soviet occupation in local traditions. The discussion in the media that accompanied the restoration activities attracted people's sincere interest in problems concerning the Old Town, really touching them, since, contrary to hollow promises of happy, but abstract communist future, this discussion, no matter how immersed in Soviet rhetoric, was directly related to familiar and palpable local themes, containing latent national sentiment and working to refresh the local memory. In addition to that, the medieval Old Town offered a real alternative environment to the sad monotony of new housing districts filled with anonymous industrially prefabricated mass architecture.

Although these connotations of national resistance died away when the medieval images became more and more popular, and the motifs of the Old Town became a socialist realist Trojan horse and a part of the repressive spectacle that dulled the alertness of the subject, it was still possible, even in the framework of commercialised tourism discourse, to realise certain cautious but fundamental tactical inversions, and to find certain freedoms within the system. For example, a small night lamp *Vana Toomas*, which was designed by Bruno Vesterberg in 1966 as a souvenir and intended to earn precious hard currency from the tourists, soon became a cult object among the locals and acquired the status of an almost compulsory element of domestic interior design. Its form was inspired by historical gas lanterns used to light the Old Town, and it was named after the medieval weathervane in the form of a soldier, *Vana Toomas*, first made in 1530 and erected on the tower of the Town Hall, whose silhouette decorated the lamp. In the Soviet time, *Vana Toomas* acquired the status of almost a sovereign 'master image'. He was depicted on innumerable souvenirs and even on jeans labels (Kuuskemaa 1978: 27); his name was given to streets¹² and restaurants, and songs and films were made about him.¹³ I should point out that *Vana Toomas* as a symbol of Tallinn is clearly a construct originating from the Soviet time. For

of the nation; ten years later it was announced that the membership amounted to 12 millions (Hosking 1989: 125–126); other sources give 1965 as the foundation year of the organisation and state that eventually the membership was 13 millions (French 1995: 183).

¹² In 1963, Dunkri Street in the Old Town, leading from the wheel well to the Town Hall Square, was renamed *Vana Tooma Street*.

¹³ The representation of this soldier both in time and in space exceeds the scope of the present article. His silhouette adorns the logo of a restaurant in Riga; as a symbol of Tallinn, the image of *Vana Toomas* is continuously in use, both in international relations (quite recently the Estonian

instance, the foreword to a collection of legends related to Tallinn, *Stories about Old Tallinn*, says:

It is interesting that no older reports were found about the now so popular Vana Toomas. It turned out that at least the local Baltic German authors were not familiar with it in the 19th century. Thus, at present it is still not clear, whether it is a literary fiction or whether the legend was circulating only among Estonians and nobody had recorded it. (Goldman 1979: 5–6.)

The spread of Vana Toomas lamps in home design eloquently demonstrates the people's attempts to undermine with materials at hand the laconic, unifying, and homogenising good taste advertised by modernism that suppressed individuality and thus controlled the subject, and which was proclaimed an official style during the thaw of Khrushchev. The sweet nostalgic and romantic night lamp denoted the inversion of tastelessness into the strategic space of the officially established normative taste, which was actively promoted in the press and which strove to control the everyday life of the individual (see de Certeau 1988: 36–39). The subordinated outwitted the repressive aims of the regime, and reversed the structure of the dominating order by their way of using the artefact, by the everyday consumer practices, and by making the artefact function within its frames, but in a different register (de Certeau 1988: 32). In such a way, the object that seemingly belonged in the dominating economic and aesthetic networks could, as a result of cautious inversion, become a means of quietly undermining these networks.

3. Old Town as a film setting

The romantic enthusiasm towards the Middle Ages, which soon reached the dimensions of a cult, deeply penetrated into both the local and the all-Union film industry. The Tallinn Old Town became the setting for numerous costume dramas (the most famous example being the saga of the three musketeers), and be-

President gave a souvenir with the image of Vana Toomas to a leader of a foreign state) and in advertising industry – with the launching of the new ID-card-based electronic ticket system for public transport, inhabitants of Tallinn were invited to acquire ID-cards with a poster depicting the steeple of the Town Hall with the Vana Toomas weathervane and the text 'Tallinn ID' (the campaign had another poster, depicting Vigri, the mascot of the 1980 Olympic Yachting Regatta held in Tallinn). It is strange how such Soviet symbols have been integrated into the new system without any problems. At the same time, the weathervane has obviously intentionally been left out of frame on the posters made by Andres Saar on the occasion of the 600th anniversary of the Tallinn Town Hall.

sides the tourists, Tallinn was each year visited by several film crews from the brother republics. The logo of the local film studio Tallinnfilm, inspired by a medieval gas lantern, made the Gothic into a kind of a symbol of the whole local cinema industry.

The Estonian film industry produced several feature films related to the subject of the Old Town at the beginning of the 1970s; some of them were historical (adventures) – *The Last Relic*, *Stone of Blood*, *Between Three Plagues*, others were strange musical camp-cocktails of the past and the present – *Old Thomas Was Stolen* and *Don Juan in Tallinn*. When the scenography of the former was subjected to the laws of time and the settings were selected according to the concrete historical (architectural) situation, then the latter allowed the crews to manipulate Old Tallinn primarily from the aesthetic point of view. But both are characterised by complicated patterns of adaptation and resistance, and playful integration of conflicting lines of force.

The production of the film *Old Thomas Was Stolen* was initiated by the commission from the Central Television Company of the Soviet Union; its artistic conception was based on its purpose – plans were made to exchange this ‘artistic concert film’ for the production of foreign television studios, therefore it was required to ‘expose the beauty, glory and pride of Tallinn’. The focal point of the rather confused plot is the unexpected animation of the famous weathervane of the Town Hall, Vana Toomas (Old Thomas) and his departure from his ‘post’. An embarrassingly clumsy and awkward ‘humorous’ frame story about Vana Toomas’ adventures in the Old Town ties loosely together a number of optimistic and naïve, routinely Soviet songs that often carry the myth of progress, and are sung by a politically correct group of performers (a street cleaner, a child, a women’s ensemble, etc.) This easy and rather simple musical show film could be called an audiovisual tourist guide of Tallinn, and it could be characterised, using the stereotyped advertisement sentences of the time, with a slogan ‘A day in Tallinn – in the capital of a miraculously beautiful and progressive Baltic health resort’, with the subheadings ‘Tallinn – the city of the sea’, ‘Tallinn – the city of towers’, etc. Tallinn is exhibited as a slightly frivolous entertainment centre, full of tourist groups and film crews. The city is, without exception, presented via the representation model fixed in guide books and photo albums, showing the frames with the museum-like, glossy and in bright sunshine gems of the Old Town and the endless stretched areas of new dwellings.

The scenographic conception of the film *Don Juan in Tallinn* could be com-

pared to the interior design principles of the above-mentioned locales, inspired by the Middle Ages, the idea of which was the modern interpretation of history, and the joining of style games and authentic materials. Historical fragments and modern elements¹⁴ were linked together with liberal easiness to form a retrospective camp-style unity, which reflects, through a strange trick mirror, the wishful reality, the striving for beautiful things and Western life style. In such a form this film is also a mosaic that describes its era with surprising precision; it is a wet dream, testifying to the unsatisfied passion for consumerism that was prevalent in the society of the time. Paradoxically, the spectacularity of the film acquires, to an extent, the tone of cultural difference, and escapism becomes the characteristic of silent opposition, not that of the state of submission. Nevertheless, although we may say that the images of the Old Town are given in a much more sensitive way than in *Old Thomas Was Stolen*, since the rustic limestone walls, the waning beauty of crumbling plaster and picturesque street views, which are displayed in plenty, rather play with the whole atmosphere of the Old Town and do not rely only on the images of a few star buildings,¹⁵ the Old Town is still only a beautiful background, the main aim of which is to act as an audiovisual tourist brochure.

The historical films *The Last Relic* and *Stone of Blood*, and *Between Three Plagues*, which can be classified as a psychological drama, are not so directly subjected to the dictation of the tourism discourse, but in the general framework of the 'medieval trend', they are, obviously, connected with it in a sense. Still, they represent an entirely different line of production design. Naturally, the genre of historical film set its limits and the design had to follow more or less concrete

¹⁴ We can see a 'medieval' interpretation of the vending machine for beer or a street sign allowing the parking of a horse at the hitching post. The simulated duel between don Juan and the Commander is commented by Florestino's voice coming from a tape-recorder, while Florestino himself is sitting in a tree, eating some white bread and drinking milk from a bottle. Don Octavio's summer house can be fitted into the range of another very popular phenomenon of the time – the unification of the modernist art of building and the national style of farm architecture, mainly expressed in summer houses (see Kalm 2001: 369–373).

¹⁵ A parallel to such way of representation is the so-called tradition of the artistic photo, cultivated in the interwar period and in the Soviet time, and characterised by picturesqueness and stylisation of the reality using the formal methods of modernists, emphasising of superficiality and a subjective choice of objects, mainly expressed by avoiding the so-called star buildings and preferring remote nooks of the Old Town (see Epner 2002: 32–33; Jänes 2002: 54). In the Soviet time, this was the only alternative to the socialist realist mainstream canon of representation, as well as the compliance of the authorities in the name of keeping the photographers from treating socially more sensitive themes (Jänes 2002: 54).

temporal and stylistic features. The aim of such films was authenticity, a historical pastiche, but it did not always result in an absolute illusory reality on the screen. Since this required painstaking preliminary work to achieve precision in details, we could suppose that the relations with the environment were deep, resulting in a more sensitive treatment of urban space. It is noteworthy that these films do not exhibit façades of the stereotyped 'star buildings'. Since established art historians and heritage restorers of the time participated as consultants in the making of these films (e.g. Villem Raam, Rein Zobel, and Teddy Böckler), we could ask whether these films hide the traces of the latent national sentiment that was present in the sphere of heritage protection.

The historical action film *The Last Relic*, produced in 1969, which became almost immediately a cult film, is centred on a romantic but complicated love story from the 16th century, presented against the background of the conspiracies and plots of the church and the nobility and the revolt of Estonian peasants against these institutions. The film is mostly borne by the general enthusiasm about the Middle Ages and Tallinn Old Town is directly shown only in one scene. The approach is romantic-rustic, exhibiting the dirtyish grey colouring of patina on limestone building blocks and showing the heaviness of squared timber. Another type of stylisation can be found in the design of the Pirita Monastery, where the rather empty rooms that sometimes have even a bright clinical appearance help to express in the form of a spatial metaphor¹⁶ the arrogance and callousness of clerical institutions. Against the background of this clean brightness, the dark silhouettes of the monks stand out graphically, and as dark are the deeds of the monks, their cynical and cold-blooded intrigues in the name of their 'holy cause'. The attitude toward the church is extremely negative, as is suitable for a good Soviet film: the nunnery is a place that holds helpless women in prison and where all kinds of crimes are committed under the label of holiness. Even the absciss has to admit that the monks living in his monastery are 'drunkards, thieves, debauchees, lazy-bones [and] numskulls'. It can be concluded that, regarding the relations between the good and the bad, and also the spatial representation of these relations, this is in almost every respect a true-to-the-regime film, which has all the prerequisites for belonging to the subject-dulling repressive entertainment mechanism of the society of spectacle – this is a comparatively simple adventure film with a

¹⁶ It is worth stressing that the use of architecture as a metaphor is a relatively rare feature in the Soviet Estonian film art.

happy ending and with just enough of romanticism and music. It is, however, also the only one among the films discussed here that acquired clearly distinguishable connotations of national resistance just through its music. According to Michel de Certeau's specification, this could be called a tactical move within the limits of an established structure having strategic power. Lyrics written by Paul-Eerik Rummo expressively displayed the connotative ambiguity, summarised in the most resonant slogan of the film – 'Our relic is freedom!' –, and interfered briefly in the discursive space of the dominating power, creating a vacuum where for a moment reigned the Other (de Certeau 1988: 30–39).

The Last Relic was successful on the all-Union screen and it was sold to dozens of foreign countries from Japan to Brazil and from Finland to Zambia, and without doubt, the film played its role in the further (over)exploiting of the medieval milieu. A direct 'clone' of this film, *Stone of Blood*, produced in 1972, could not repeat its predecessor's success. This film was based on a real incident – the execution of a nobleman and manor owner Johann von Uexküll on May 7, 1535 in punishment for his killing of one of his peasants who had escaped to the town. This unprecedented death sentence passed by the Tallinn Town Council to execute a nobleman resulted in a scandal in Livonia. Obviously, the treatment of a very specific historic event conditioned a much more rigorous pursuit of authenticity in representing the environment. Lembit Remmelgas, the author of the film script, who also was the chief editor of Tallinnfilm,¹⁷ has said that the Middle Ages had to become one of the protagonists of the film,¹⁸ therefore, they 'could not let their fantasy run and had to restore ... a more or less concrete image of the Tallinn of the 16th century'.¹⁹ The contemporary Tallinn, however, was no longer suitable for authentic recording of the time representations of 400 years ago, and several rather grand settings had to be erected (the most imposing among them was the almost life-size 'scientifically' exact copy of the Harju Gate). Close co-operation with restorers and art historians can also be seen in the somewhat surprising red interior of the Town Council Hall of the Tallinn Town Hall, the tone of which followed the original colour that had been discovered during the probing of old layers of paint during the restoration work, which was car-

¹⁷ Probably just the fact that the chief editor of the studio participated in the writing of the film script testifies how important was the subject of the Middle Ages for Tallinnfilm (or, rather, the studio was expected to turn out such films).

¹⁸ *Stone of Blood*. Archival file: ERA, f. R-1707, n. 1, s. 1256, p. 6.

¹⁹ *Stone of Blood*. Archival file, p. 31.

ried out simultaneously with the shooting of the film. The general greyish colour scheme of the film, showing shades characteristic to limestone, proceeds from the idea that the limestone gives Tallinn its characteristic appearance, and thus follows the point of view expressed in the contemporary newspaper articles.

While *The Last Relic* and *Stone of Blood*, being historical adventure films, belonged to the sphere of entertainment industry, *Between Three Plagues*, based on the script written by the great master of Estonian historical fiction, Jaan Kross, was specified by the author as a psychological-historical drama, and can thus be regarded as an intentional withdrawal from the popular culture meant first and foremost to entertain the masses. The scenography and cinematography of the film are characterised by the 'static of medieval engraving' (Tobro 1970), suggesting a reflective mood instead of the dynamic spectacularity and false optimism of socialist realism. The goal to oppose easy entertainment, which is visually connoted, among others, by the much-used picture postcard views of the Old Town, was already embedded in the original version of Jaan Kross' screenplay that prohibited the 'exhibition of old architecture and museum pieces', asking instead to emphasise 'the fracture of the material of backgrounds and larger props ...: cobblestone pavement, grain of timber, rough textiles and especially, limestone walls' (Kross 1965: 2). Viewing the result, it seems that Kross' wishes were taken into account. According to the director Virve Aruoja, it was namely Kross who recommended his old friend Villem Raam as the consultant in architectural history.²⁰ Raam played a leading role in selecting the locations,²¹ helping to find new and fresh camera perspectives instead of old routine views of the Old Town. Nevertheless, characteristically for a traditional film, which *Between Three Plagues* undoubtedly is, the architectural scenery does not interfere with the plot of the film and does not develop into metaphors. Still, the avoidance of the romanticism of the Old Town, and the lack of domineering popular music instantly locate this film outside the repressive desire-creating machine and the illusions that (re)produce wishful reality. But as far as the sense of national resistance is concerned – although the film indeed presents a number of elements that are ideologically questionable in the context of Soviet society, e.g., the position of the protagonist, the famous author of *The Chronicle of Livonia*, Balthasar Russow, as a pastor; the question about the permissibility of speaking the truth and

²⁰ Author's interview with Virve Aruoja, March 5, 2004.

²¹ Author's interview with Virve Aruoja.

the censorship; the fight between the power and the arts,²² everything remains within the limits set by the system and the film does not carry national attitude.

Representations of the Old Town, either stressing the tourism angle, as in *Old Thomas Was Stolen*, and *Don Juan in Tallinn*, or being a historical pastiche, as *Stone of Blood*, or in the carefully reserved style of *Between Three Plagues*, did not exceed the limits set by Soviet cinematography and did not directly rebel against any of its ideological requirements, expressing rather the signs of adaptation than those of rebellion, but still acting as a kind of a *locus* of cultural difference.

Conclusion

Already the essence and functioning of the 'medieval trend' was ambivalent and paradoxical in the context of the officially 'modernist' Soviet Union. On the one hand, the ideological and representational needs of the powers were satisfied, and the medieval images of Western Europe were integrated into the international fabric of Soviet culture. On the other hand, it allowed the locals a legitimate opportunity to maintain contacts with their history and at least some individuality in the framework of an official paradigm that unified the environment and ironed out all distinctive features. At the same time, these medievalising projections can be seen as more refined versions of socialist realism, where the pseudo-ethnographic 'national form', created with beer mugs and folk costumes in the Stalinist era donned the robe of the Gothic, thus lulling the vigilance about the 'socialist content'; but nevertheless, it was an opportunity to adapt less painfully to the inevitable situation.

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²² The most direct reference to the fight between the power and the spirit can be found in the scene where the Town Council discusses the problem, whether to permit the publication of Russow's *Chronicle* or not: the aldermen (i.e. the power) are played by a number of public figures from cultural sphere, including Kross and Raam themselves.

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Figure 1] Vana Toomas night lamp