

# ABOUT THE ADDRESS IN ESTONIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

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## **About the factors that determine the meaning of a place depicted in a photo**

The interpretation of a photographic image is generally determined by the meaning of the photo as a cultural sign (Lotman 1979: 56–57). In spite of the pains the so-called art of photography has taken to stylise-abstract-conventionalising the photo at any cost: its status as a sign is still defined by its areas of application: journalism, forensics, ID procedures and many others. Since the photo was brought to standards within the parameters of the 19th-century family and village community, work community and other institutions (Bourdieu 1990: 73–84), which change rather slowly, the first questions in the reception of the photo are still "who" and "when" are depicted in it. The next question is usually about the place where the photo was taken. Thus the reception of the photo presupposes the relative concreteness of the place and location, which also explains the traditional use of the photo not only as a work of art, but as the source material for a descriptive literary work (especially travelogues and stories of everyday life) as well. Because of these characteristics, it is obvious why the photo dominates in the press and also in different imagologies. This being the case, it would at least theoretically be possible to talk about styles when dealing with the seemingly innocent and "objective" photo recording of reality.

## **About reference and style**

All through its earlier history, a photographic image generally referred to a concrete place. The question about the concrete vs. abstract relationship of the pictorial space with the space of its object, and about the gradational scale between these limiting points arose only with the appearance of modern ideas in this medium (Linnap 2001). Modernist photo, and especially its ideas that were related to neorealism, aimed at the "new vision," differing from the customary or-

thometry, which has been characterised as a structured view upon the world (Eskildsen 1981: 12). This meant that the central interest was essentially shifted from the true-to-nature depiction of objects to the problems of style, and the previous main question "'what' has been depicted?" was replaced by the interest in the ways of depiction. Leaving aside photomontages and other practices that include the intervention of an artisan, we can summarise that such a "structured" idea was based on the differences caused by the hardly noticeable, but still important differences between the eye and the lens, the speed of the shutter and the speed of perception, or between the photo negative and the pupil. Paradoxically, the same means of photography that were used to "naturalise" the notions of realism and being true-to-nature in the 19th century, now became distorted in the modern context.

Such changes resulted in a number of interpretative misunderstandings – the facts that the images depicted in a photo were not concretised or that their addressee was not specified in space and time contradicted the so far universal notions of cultural signs. Even in the 1980s, it was still grieved in Estonian reception of photography that nobody had seen "a work that would fully answer the questions: Who? Whom? Where? When?" at the exhibitions ... and that it would mean that "we have sacrificed the concreteness to a symbol, and we have done so in the field of art with the strongest leaning towards documentary?! [---]" For instance, I am looking at a dispassionate title of a photo, *Landscape No 23*, thinking about why there couldn't be an ancient Estonian place name instead of such indefiniteness, or why the photos of the old town shouldn't be labelled with the name of the street and the number of the house." (Rünk 1987: 45.) Similar words were said about the popular series of photos titled *Night Landscapes* (1987), made by the author of the present article. The critics ascertained that the photos lacked temporal and spatial coordinates, "rendering the impression that the photos have been taken by an unconscious flashlight that was fluttering about like a bat. [---] *Night Landscapes* reveal that Linnap has [---] abandoned the sensual perception of the world." (Laurits 1988: 7.) The reception of photography often rather refers to disturbances in "normal" communication than to the identifications of different styles. The described "irresolutenesses" also indicate quite clearly that the position of the photo in the field of cultural signs is determined and specified by much more powerful institutions than "art." Considering the social and cultural context of the period, these institutions could

only be the press and the family photography of practical nature. Or in other words, the persisting requirement for the unity of time and place, and the first questions *à la* "whom?" and "where?" that have already become an automatism, can ultimately be withdrawn only when some newer and more convenient way of depicting images would replace photography in its previous utilitarian roles. What's more – society needs time to get used to these newer ways. Specifying "style" in more documentary practices of photography is difficult only for those who have customarily identified the notion, relying on the experience of the earlier types of art, e.g., the daring methods of painting. But if we accept the unavoidable fact that the definitions of style, type and other similar definitions are open-ended notions which can be expanded together with the specific characteristics of the new ways of depiction, we can also understand why this field of pictorial depiction, calling itself an innocent documentation, is actually full of intonations, as different and hidden as they can be. But it seems that up to the time people notice them and reach an agreement about their nature as cultural signs, the photo can successfully hold the place of both "the scene of action and the scene of the crime." It is still vehemently believed that one can carry *Tallinn* in his pocket, or that a book with brownish covers, titled *Leben danach* (Tenno 1994) really corresponds to the onetime Prussia. Nobody pays attention to the fact that such albums and places that are depicted in them only have the role of the cheap surrogates of prehistoric or unpopulated nature (Grundberg 1991: 36).

### **Homey places and traumatic places**

Estonian photography, which had depicted only places and locations before WW II, and shown only lyrical and problem-free beautiful pictures *à la* "The life and beauty of Pirita," became traumatised and more interesting only during the epochal 1940s. Paradoxically, it seems that revolutionary events, not the state of equilibrium, are necessary for the emergence of a story, or a narrative. In Estonia, such a dynamical situation became possible only due to the intervention of external forces: the Soviet occupation brought along forced migration and architectural, functional or linguistic re-definition of the places. The whole complex of perceiving space, places and locations was destined to change, and new rules were made for pictorial depiction. When the notion of home, prevailing in the Soviet Union, accustomed us with "homeland" instead of our own home,

such a way of thinking was accompanied with a hidden attempt to break the citizens off from their most intimate territory – their "nesting space" (Bachelard 1999: 145–161). This process has rather visibly been reflected in Estonian culture: when up to the 1940s, the photographing of one's home – the house, the garden or the nearest surroundings of the house – was a wide-spread, even quite regular activity, then the beginning of the Soviet occupation marks a turn. Thousands of citizens had traditionally identified themselves with their home, but now, after having been moved over to hostel-type dwellings and houses built in the Khrushchevian era, they were not able to accustom themselves with internment even within one and the same town. The wretchedness of their situation probably did not inspire them at all to record it in the form of images: their location in an x-storey of a house made of large building blocks did not form such an aspect of their identity which they would have wanted to put into personal archives, carry in their pockets or exhibit freely. But while examining the pictorial depiction of the traumatic forced migration into the eastern or western areas, we face an amazingly different reality. The so far unbelievable facts can fill an important gap in our perception of history. It seems that when changing location within one's home town caused some kind of contempt for taking photos, the more radical changes in territory shaped an opposite attitude towards photography.

### **Siberia and Sisyphus**

The most surprising fact is that plenty of photos have been taken of those Siberian settlements where Estonians had been deported. For example, the photo collection of Ants Leitmäe, who spent the years of 1949–1959 in the rough conditions of the northern areas of the Soviet Union, contains more than 1000 (!) images. When the homes in Khrushchevian houses were obviously considered to be shameful and temporary, the 25+5 or 10 years of totally different ways of living were considered as sheer inevitability. Photos that I have collected from this period do not correspond to the ideology that the Estonian state attempts to install into our minds now. The "new home place" was depicted with an obvious awe of nature: new dwellings were rising amid large and deep forests; differing from the local customs, the territory surrounding them was closed off with fences. Since the amateur photos taken in Siberia continue the classical rite of

documenting, these pictures mostly depict work and leisure, funerals and weddings: children are playing, a young man rides his motorcycle, an old person dies, men and women cut timber. The originally alien place is "tamed" and the trauma is replaced by all the things that are done at home. Together with this, the pictorial depicting of the new location also becomes normalised (Burgin 1996: 56). At the same time, but in an entirely different place, French philosopher Albert Camus struggles with his life, talks about depression and writes with great pains his *Myth of Sisyphus* in 1942.

### **The Estonian variety of the Wild West: *With a wheelbarrow and a camera***

Besides the subject of Siberia, the forced emigration of Estonians to Western countries is another so far rather poorly mapped area of location photographs. In this light, Eric Soovere's collection of thousands of photos, his very detailed documentation of such forced changing of homes, is more valuable than ever (Soovere 1999; see Linnap 2000a: 42–54). Photos of his original home – a farm in Southern Estonia – document the place with a special thoroughness; such activity was obviously inspired by his awareness of the need to leave soon. We can feel how the author tries to compensate his losing his home with photos – the mechanics of fetishism begin to have their effect: he takes photos in order to be able to "take with him" the places that are dear and close to him, and to be able to live through the scenes again and again (Metz 1990: 155–164). Whereas the initial part of Soovere's project is rather logical, his nuanced way of recording the places and locations on his journey of escape is much more surprising: Heltermaa is the last stop on the soil of Estonia, but it is followed, one by one, by Stettin, Altdamm, Augsburg and other German and Sudeten German places with and without names. He does not heroise, criticise or evaluate these places – different places in Central Europe have only the "we were here" meaning for Soovere; these places and locations only form stages and backgrounds for the main and minor characters of his story. The author in the mountains of Sudetenland, and sleeping on the roof of a railway carriage; "Red emissaries" calling the refugees back "home"; barracks, milk queues, cultural and sports events, etc., form a brief and kaleidoscopic view of the world where there was nothing secure or permanent. In the Estonia that was left behind, at the same time, the new powers started to establish a new situation – to create an everlasting republic of

"workers and farmers." To keep such a formation operative, it was again necessary to continuously recreate the imagology related to its places and locations with the help of pictorial images.

### **The geopolitics of "primeval" nature: do you know the land?**

The imagology of a state always begins with so-called primeval nature: the forests of Germany, the lakes of Finland or the bogs and mires of Estonia are the first visions that catch our eye if we assume the position of a visitor/tourist. Such logic follows the "Aeroflot-Arcadia": we come from far away and descend to the promised land from a height; we are still partially governed by a "mythological" prior knowledge, we still do not see details; we cannot and even do not want to ascertain relations between physical geography and political geography.<sup>1</sup> The deductive structures that describe human knowledge have also been based on the arrival through the air gates: in the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC), natural sciences always precede the humanities. Supposedly, just for these customary reasons, the first pages of the "country and people"-type photo albums or the opening shots of newsreels tend to be in green colours: they start with pictures of "virgin" nature, and keep us looking at them so long that we calm down and obtain a positive attitude towards the following events. Unlike the artistic depiction, the ideological use of photos and films is an exceptionally systematic and visually polyscopic domain – although the works of this genre are narratives in their content, they avoid all shots, condensations, focal points, culminations, and everything that would enable introspection, and could overexcite the spectator. The first shots depicting picturesque forests viscously merge into waves that roll onto the frigid shore of the "sea of peace," they are followed by panoramas of low lands and by the pictures of somewhat dull and doltish inhabitants who are slowly and assuredly engaged in this or that fruitful activity, all for the "common good." Then, very slowly, and accompanied by old folk songs, attention is drawn to allegories and history: flowers, bees and fruit trees and the natural way of living, complemented by the "natural" past, shown in the open air museum. It is made clear that from the very beginning everything has already been natural here – churns, spinning wheels and kegs have been made of "real

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<sup>1</sup> See the so-called representative albums: *Do You Know the Land?* Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1965; *Daina Lietuvai*. Vilnius: Mintis, 1984, and others.

wood"; life is full of real honey and beeswax, and all this, together with modern information technology, now forms the rather organic and agrarian-digital Estonian Eurorepublic.

Such a way of presenting the location gives an impression of an unpretentiously nice peripheral territory, where one cannot find anything representative or memorable. Since there are no condensations – there are no problems, either. Such an impression is achieved in both the "ESSR"-type or "Estonian Republic"-type loyally presented screen or book versions by using "creative forgetting." Both cases exclude the social "subconscious" or other aspects of reality, which are necessary to get to know the country and the people, but which are not relevant to foreign visitors. The much-praised quality of photography of showing us the "whole visible reality" (Stolovitš 1992: 131) permanently remains only a potential. But the fact that the photo is a way of depiction with almost limitless opportunities is shown by the historical transformation of reality. When the Soviet Union and its components – the Soviet republics – carried the idea of modernity, industry was the most important aspect of knowing a country and a locality. And since "international imperialism" was plotting and scheming in the immediate vicinity of the state border, the otherwise "pacifist" geographical albums had to contain the images of the "peaceful military" and other characters from the "kingdom of labour and leisure." Still more important is the fact that together with the abundance of representative albums, such geographical maps were published during these 50 years which did not support travelling even along the same village roads which these albums so highly praised as sights worth visiting. But such a controversy stands only until we realise the genre limits of the different ways of representation: a newsreel and an album are just meant to give a kaleidoscopic picture. Introspection, which occurs rather in a microscopic or periscopic way, has never corresponded to ideological institutions – and the latter attempt, independently of regime, to introduce the notion that documentary depiction should reflect only the external appearance of things. In the same manner, the interests of different forms of documentation – especially the artistic depiction and strategic topography – are always opposed to each other. If the latter form prevails in the process of shaping our perception of nature, we can expect all kinds of complications.

## **Topophobia: how administrated space has been depicted by the arts that use camera**

In the Estonian SSR, the surrounding physical space was defined by routine administrative and sanctioning rules that caused claustrophobia, and directly limited both the freedom of movement and the freedom of self-perception. In the situation where the regime of travel and perception of places that are characteristic to "inmates of a half-closed prison" were applied to the whole population, a number of ambiguous problems concerning leaving the country and arriving in it arose in everyday life. Eventually, even the citizens of Estonia needed official invitations and visas to travel to different places in Estonia, and they were subjected to similar rules, specifying the places they could visit, as visitors from other countries. In Soviet Estonia, access to many places and locations was limited, and there were also lists that limited the number of places where the taking of photos was allowed (Linnap 1997: 4–12). Leaving aside the territories under direct military command, where photographing was totally forbidden, we should stress that a kind of schizoid panic concerning photographing was overwhelming and without any special logic, applying almost to everything that did not belong to the parade exhibits of the Soviet "reality." Among the violators of such rules were obviously people who displayed "suspicious interest" towards railroads and crossroads, and naturally, such enthusiasts who happened to explore side streets, back yards, cemeteries and garbage cans to satisfy their aesthetic passions. The fear that "aesthetic" interests, especially those reflected in photography, could hide ideological or strategic intentions soon grew into state paranoia. A good example is the case of Semjon Shkolnikov, a maker of newsreels in the 1960s, who had three times been awarded the Stalin Prize. When filming a city panorama, he was allowed to have only one, but by no means two representative towers of Old Tallinn in one and the same shot.<sup>2</sup> Things were even worse when one of the imagological representative accents of Tallinn, the church of St. Nicholas, lost its spire in a fire in 1986. It was difficult to prohibit this event from being watched, but it was possible to prohibit its recording.<sup>3</sup> As geopolitical pressure

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with the author of this article. – *P. L.*

<sup>3</sup> Even in 1986, the authorities wanted to prohibit the presentation of Peeter Laurits's photo of the church of St. Nicholas with its broken spire at the exhibition of the Society of Estonian Photographers at the Tallinn City Museum. – *P. L.*

kept all kinds of photographic depicting under control, and "our life through pictures" was depicted using certain predetermined typical places and subjects, and there was a fixed list of fields of life and locations that were meant for recording; the artists who worked with photography tended to totally ignore temporal and spatial reality. This phenomenon can especially be pronouncedly seen in the mannerist "*fin-de-siècle*"-aesthetics of the 1980s, exhibited by my own generation, the essence of which is best explained by Gaston Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space* (Bachelard 1999).

### **Topophilia: indoor scenes and plant images in the photography of the 1980s**

The favourite notion of Bachelard's – *topophilia* – can well be adapted to the Estonian photography of the 1980s. Space and places need not be analysed, but loved (Bachelard 1999: 31). The open-air spaces of Soviet Estonia were full of all kinds of border zones, coastal zones and special zones, which were not accessible for amateur "topological analysis," and only a few areas were "permissible," besides the Matsalu Bird Reserve or Viiralt's oak.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the artists started to create the "happy space" and poetic images according to their own (historical) knowledge of the "kingdom of artistic images": "The fresh and lively photography of today, being based on the Modernism of the previous turn of the century, is neo-romantically self-centred and inclined to freedom. First of all we notice the abundance of nature motifs, discrete stylisation, broadening of the symbolical plane and the refined sense of beauty." (Laurits, Linnap 1987: 66.) Such refining brought along the abundance of natural motifs and the unleashing of natural forces right on the photo paper. Arabesque pictures, and the mixing of images from different negatives and different times offered no focus for the eye – the spectators and the censors were not given the slightest opportunity for identifying with the images, let alone addressing what they saw. Whereas just "in the next room," in figurative art, "space was empty and white" (Helme 1986), and a discussion was in progress about with what it should be filled (Juske 1986), there was no such problem in the photography of the 1980s. Escaping from the pressure of the outer world which had been domineering over film and photography,

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<sup>4</sup> Viiralt's (Eduard Viiralt – an outstanding Estonian graphic artist, 1898–1954) oak and other "sights" belonged to the typical menu of representative photo albums of Soviet Estonia. In the 1960s such scenes became a routine at photo exhibitions as well. – P. L.

the artists withdrew into the dark silence of their laboratories to discover the independent identity of poetical images (Bachelard 1999: 10) – life's "outdoor geography" was replaced by "aesthetical geometry" (Bachelard 1999: 165). Basically, it was voyeurism, manifested in the form of a "child's consciousness" (Laurits, Linnap 1987: 66), and resulting in visions that clearly indicated that "going out was forbidden": dusty corners of rooms and halls, nameless slum houses and yards, lighted corridors and flowers or tree-crowns, rather reminding us of the tamed flowerbeds of a botanical garden or a home terrace than wide areas of open-air geography.

The confiscated freedom of movement had to be justified with indoor scenes and plant motifs, to preserve the mutilated self-perception: but a magnifying glass as an argument of suggestiveness (Bachelard 1999: 229) expected too much creativity from the spectator. Such organic delirium passed quickly – as early as 1988, the majority of photographers, who had previously mixed different eras, participated in an exhibition with the sobering title of *I have never been to New York*.

### **Columbuses with cameras: explorations in the Estonian photo of the 1990s**

Since a large number of all kinds of prohibited and border zones had existed in Soviet Estonia – the closed territories that had belonged to the occupying army, and the border and coastal zones with limited access – which the local civilians had never visited, it is only logical that in the 1990s, a kind of euphoric exploration of the previously-closed territories began. The main mechanism inspiring the pictorial "exploration" and the reflection of the new notions of the reformed homeland was, of course, the media industry. But Jüri Liim's "mapping and accusing activities" of the early 1990s can be considered as a more problematic and versatile approach (Linnap 1994). Starting as a "private scout," Liim began to document and thereby to incriminate the then already illegal presence of the Soviet Union on the territory of independent Estonia. Cataloguing with decisive self-confidence the nuclear reactors in Paldiski, the artillery ranges in Aegviidu and on the island of Pakri, the KGB communications centres, the objects of satellite communications, etc., Liim revealed the things that had existed only because they had been kept secret. Areas, places and locations, the existence of which had so far been only guessed at, were now made public. Such recording

demystified the former border zones and opened up at least one dark prohibited zone in the Estonians' consciousness.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the photographers started to depict still another new territory – the newly opened world – with special eagerness; first, of course, the idealised West, but later also other areas of the world. This was the very process that unleashed the new geographical consciousness, which had been confined within the borders of the Soviet Union – Crimea, Lake Baikal, Leningrad, Kislovodsk, etc. The Estonian version of the *National Geographic* of the 1990s made the visiting of far-away lands a special and awe-inspiring adventure: the press proudly exhibited the first visitors from New York, as well as those who had arrived from Johannesburg, Beijing or Adelaide. Such "travel competitions" were of course accompanied by narcissistic and widespread recording activities – first, by photography, and later by videos. Scores of meetings devoted to travel stories were organised, slide and film shows were held, which, besides giving information, also reflected "new success" and marked the changing social values and hierarchies. Artistic projects also displayed different places and locations of the world. Tõnu Tormis's *Some Mountain* (1997) and Peeter Linnap's *Things from the Sea* (1996) can be named as a few examples of visiting different geographical locations and introducing taxonomic and comparative strategies into Estonian photography. Linnap aimed at a representative description of different locations as "sites of discovery" (Treier 1997), but Tormis was interested in the typological comparison of geological formations of different areas of the world, just as he had done in his earlier series of photos, 3 (Tormis 1997).

### **50 Years Later: Peeter Tooming's historical topology**

In such a euphoria, Peeter Tooming and Carl Sarap's unique exhibition and book project, *50 Years Later*, was undeservedly left out of focus. In the late 1930s, Sarap had catalogued different places in Estonia and shot postcard images; in 1987, Tooming started to reconstruct these images, the depicted places and the memory of places with the help of these old photos. The ingenuity of the project, especially regarding its social and political context, lies in the fact that the responsibility for the choices of locations was posthumously left to Sarap, but interpretation was left to the spectators. Tooming wisely avoided all possible judgmental commentaries in the book: he does not criticise or accuse

anybody. But the simple, even neutral photos taken 50 years later say very clear things about both Estonia and Soviet Estonia. Even a wordless comparison of the pairs of photos convinces the spectator of "the fruitful influence of socialism": churches "now" are much more dilapidated than they were "then," and the same stands for streets, playgrounds, industrial buildings or parks. The places of "now" are geographically located in the same place as they were "then"; as a rule, they have the same names, but their appearance has changed so much that their names remain the only common things they share with their prototypes. Thus Tooming summarises the virtual history of the ESSR in a laconic, but extremely striking way. The turning of the method of ideological rhetoric – the infamous "before and now" – upside-down adds some playfulness to this project. Here, as well as in the whole Estonian tradition of photographing places and locations, it seems that we are dealing with "social impressionism"; the only difference is that at the previous turn of the century, the Sun shone the meaningful light over the objects and places, but now, the light is of an entirely different character.

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