

In identifying the notion of 'Estonia' we meet very different images. Among these, spatial and territorial experiences are probably dominant: natural/geographical places or tectonic-linguistic formations such as islands, hills and rivers; marshes and swamps, rare caves – the existing but also abstracted or even missing *loci*. A bit later, our memory reveals a whole cluster of more abstract associations: occupation/freedom/independence; smallness and our curiously painful 'culturedness' – probably followed by dawdling behind Western ideals, and so on. What matters is that Estonia is firstly a *spatial* and only then *temporal/historical* unit. It is worth adding here that for some people Estonia might simply be a familiar place and location, whereas for others it is no more than another socio-cultural unit, for yet others it denotes a political-administrative phenomenon called the Republic of Estonia with its striped border posts and politics, where people are busy with matters Estonian, currently getting themselves into the EU and NATO. A foreigner's glance at Estonia could probably be associated with investment interests, ideologies of cheap labour and attractive real estate deals. All these different interests are accompanied by different approaches and modalities that bring about a need for diverse representations of Estonia in word, sound, picture, etc. However, it is here that a paradox emerges: in Estonia where the inhabitants often boast about the early elimination of illiteracy, visual illiteracy is still present here.

## **Estonia in different sign systems**

Estonia also exists in different languages, in domestic and foreign languages – first of all, though, it exists in notions and images of different systems, in numerous sign systems and agendas that use variously shaped formats and forms of representation. Thus a certain kind of Estonia exists in text form in many lan-

guages and texts in the world: travelogues, tourist books and interpretations in fiction. Simultaneously, and perhaps more obviously, Estonia is present in visual (or rather verbal-visual) manifestations: albums, homepages, promotional films and postcards. We could even say that physical-geographical and administrative-political units *only* exist thanks to such representations, because this is the only way the physical world can be grasped at once. The latter aim is precisely the reason why panoramic models of countries are created: maps are produced, aerial photographs taken, newsreels filmed. Every such format-sign system used for this particular purpose has a different power of representationality and coverage – a different information-value and its own way of relating to truths, or modality.<sup>1</sup> Regarding maps of a country or town we can talk about scientific-technological modality, and the same goes for diagrams presenting data about the economy, population, etc. However, postcards, photo albums and promotional films mainly represent naturalist modality. Relying on the principle/illusion of similarity, and on a *ca a ete* indexical cultural habit, it is namely the pictorial presentation that aims to create the first impression and thus has the meaning of façade in imagological strategies, as well. Only then do the writings based on narrative structures enter that should make visible what cannot be ‘read’ on the maps-pictures. ‘Filmic Estonia’ should unite the visual, verbal and sound interpretations and animate the physical-geographical-cultural-ideological space by means of dynamic and narrative text structures. As all the mentioned ways of presentation are essentially sign systems and languages, which only create *models* of Estonia – texts – then it goes without saying that each of them covers the modelled prototype not wholly, to the full extent, but partially, adding to this presentation the stamp of its own structure. Here, leaving aside the problem of the complementary nature between various Estonia-texts’, and ignoring other systems except the visual, we can claim that there are different forms in this area, too – painted Estonia, filmed Estonia and photographed Estonia.

Despite the same object or topic of description, different forms of depiction show different aspects of Estonia. At the same time, all these forms also (re)produce ‘Estonia’. Thinking of ‘painted Estonia’, for example, we first of all remember the romantic idealisations on the canvases of local artists Kristjan Raud, Günther Reindorff, Konrad Mägi, Nikolai Triik, Jaan Elken or Peeter

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of modality, especially multimodality, has been thoroughly analysed by English socio-semioticians Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. See Kress, van Leeuwen 2001.

Allik. What we primarily learn from these is the relationship between the ‘artist-genius’ and his homeland. Through this, national-romantic, so-called realist or socially critical positions could be visualised – in case the cultural-political regimes of the time have granted them some right to exist. This also means that the absence of certain positions and hence discourses is just *as significant* as their manifestation. Of the filmic Estonia we automatically expect something quite different than the nice picture set out as described above. Regarding cultural signs the film medium has *a priori* defined itself differently from painting, and therefore a film produced in a purely painting-like key would only be a row of ‘opening frames’, an audio-visual programme that would be difficult to bear. Still, it must be noted that despite general expectations of film as a arena for action, events, processes, and first of all other temporal categories, this medium too contains a lot of painting-like ‘looking around’, surprisingly inert and passive following of the events. Denying the film’s eventfulness and (contemporan-ity) temporariness, this seems to refer to another, rather more general cultural mechanism than the mere specifics of the medium. Such mechanisms are more clearly delineated when we examine the photographed Estonia, which certainly is the most widely spread and most common, and thus the most defining form of presentation in imagology.

### **Pictorial Estonia: utopian and heterotopic space**

Firstly, some general principles in the field of depiction–non-depiction should be identified. We can rely here on Michel Foucault’s politicised geographical philosophy of space where one of the central notions is heterotopic space (1986). Differentiating (and occasionally opposing) this notion to utopian space, Foucault presents as examples a cemetery, hospital, prison, motel, but especially the ‘orbital territories’, e.g. the space on a ship. Such a list of *loci*, however, does not seem to suit the state’s pictorial imagology, as it would destroy the verve and lack of problems of the ideological continuity. Never belonging in the ‘façade menu’ of the pictorial presentation, the heterotopic space is under control, cautiously, and once in a blue moon revealed in the process of ‘journalistic activism’. We recall here the primarily anti-routine, but on–off understandings of the photo-journalists (this profession appeared in Estonia only at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s), such as *A Day in the Soviet Union*, *A Day in Estonia*. In their brief, hasty style they also tried to show the darker side of everyday life. This kind

of superficial actionism naturally does not offer any serious alternative to the existing routine pictorial reality: as such (alternative) albums do not spread, the pictorial types created in them will not persist, nor will societal understandings change. Instead, the Estonian visual market is dominated by an exceptionally standardised tourist or picture album that is not so much 'normal' as normalised, i.e. developed into being *habitual* (see Bourdieu 1990). Even more – a need was created namely for urban and nature albums. A tourist or just a patriot of the 'beauty of fatherland' must be able to stuff Estonia into his/her bag or pocket exactly as s/he hoped it would be.

### **Dreams: the menu and the price list**

The menu of hopes consists of a handful of familiar things: we call them *sights*. The units of such sights are monuments – both the formations of primeval nature and the marks of historical-cultural focal points that are attributed special attention and cult value. This very monument-centricity, phenomenon of sights, betrays its origin in modernist society. It was precisely in the course of society's modern pragmatism when earlier and also new cult values acquired political-economic meaning and gradually transformed into consumer value. A sight in this context primarily today denotes an object, performance or spectacle for which it is worth *paying* a fee. The expenses connected with sightseeing mostly constitute travel, tickets and the services of a guide. In tourism discourse, mementoes and pictorial fetishes are added: albums, postcards, badges and stamps. Initially special and thus select, the once utopian menu of classical sights that consisted of rare forms of nature (crater, canyon, dune, sequoia glade, cave) and historical-cultural *loci* (battlefield, execution place, first house of town X and Y), has been standardised and devalued. They exist as much as photographs depict them, but at the same time gradually lose their uniqueness if new sights are not continuously invented. The latter causes much headache in Estonia, although our by now exotic recent past has quite a lot to offer for sale. Instead, we try to do the impossible: the sign campaign of Estonia leaves the impression that the whole country is interpreted as yet another new company, for which a set of emblems and style could be devised within a matter of a few months.

## Origins of orthometric spleen

Coming back to the visual illiteracy mentioned before, we should start with a brief overview of the pictorial tradition of presentation connected with places. Presenting countries as geographical units began in the 19th century due to the activities of photographers-explorers: Francis Frith, William Henry Jackson, Timothy O'Sullivan and others were the first curious Western whites who began depicting faraway *exotic loci*. In the 19th century these were mostly areas in the Middle East; in America also sparsely populated and picturesque spots of nature. In the course of this kind of activity, the first canons of pictorial presentation began to be formed: comprehensiveness of a place's visualisation, a brief, wide and superficial glance from afar that could be characterised as 'panoramia' and 'kaleidoscopia' (Jay 1988). It is no chance that something like this came to be called albums of glossy pictures; in German *glanz* (Estonian *klants*) means 'shine', 'sparkle' and 'gloss', and clearly refers to superficiality. Besides, *glanz* is also associated with bright sunshine, which well characterises the light of post-card type pictures. Considering the scopic regimes of the 19th century, the dominating idea was that of an interiorised viewer who observed the outside world.<sup>2</sup> This kind of a world was naturally meant to look pretty and alluring, as one of the aims of these photographic collections was to attract people to travel and resettle. Taking into account habit, the latter was easier when the exotic places were shown to be empty or sparsely populated. Hence the deserted atmosphere of expedition photographs that made an inventory of places and locations.

The French word *cadre* ('surrounding', 'frame') helps to explain the choice of plan of such photographs, and why the general plan, observation from a distance, prevails. The latter is a precondition namely for their type of photographing, offering the 'right' scale to architectural units: houses, complexes of buildings, streets or squares. Seeking other explanations for the sense of distance we cannot help noticing the regular absence of close-ups. On the one hand, leaving out close objects can be explained by the original wish not to interfere, to record everything 'as it was'. On the other hand, the history of pictorial depiction allows one to presume that observational attitude indeed requires the viewer's distance from the photographed object (Crary 1990: 36). From the point of view of sense

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Crary and John Berger have extensively written about the ways of observing. See Crary 1993, Crary 1999, also Berger 1980.

psychology the empty field of vision (empty square, corn field, valley or beach) on the photographs is associated with the lack of any sense of danger – the viewer has a chance to control as large a part of space as possible both in width and depth.<sup>3</sup> This is another explanation of why the atmosphere of those pictures is so soothing and makes one want to dream.

The characteristics of the other group of photographic style that depicted countries and peoples was determined by technological possibilities, especially the modest film speed of photographic materials and the clumsiness of the view camera as an instrument of observation. This was namely the reason why promotional pictures were indifferent to the category of *time*. The third reason, more like a background, could be the habit of equalising a picture primarily with painting and the painting-like, which here plays a significant role. The picture album as a format dates back to the 19th century visual industry, and it can be connected with positivism – the central category of understanding the world of the time. One feature of positivism is the mania of collecting everything (e.g. butterfly or rock collections); by today, this has turned into a fascination with talismans and souvenirs. Among the ‘I-was-here’ type of things, pictures of the places experienced have become especially popular.

### Possible ways of observing

It should be clear from the above discussion why pictorial Estonia abounds in photographs taken during the daytime (or sunset) and why the general plan and overview prevail. A similar scopic regime in cinematography is the genre of the newsreel – an overview and a newsreel are characterised by the principle of a kaleidoscope: it is a rapid, casual way of observing (Greek *kalos* – ‘beautiful’; *scopeo* – ‘observe’). This way of observing clearly stresses the aspect of entertainment. As most Estonian albums are meant for the tourist industry rather than the local population, they indeed represent the strategies of entertainment. They are supposed to be diverse, offer a ‘flight’ over natural and cultural landscapes, masses of people, etc. What is never expected of them is any kind of deeper examination, peeping from behind the façades and inside phenomena. I would not want to determine right now whether such ways of observing should be called mi-

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<sup>3</sup> The connection between the field of vision’s emptiness/fullness and the pre-thinking self-protective mechanisms has been examined by the school of Edinburgh’s sense psychology.

cro-, tele-, peri- or gyroscopic. Such possibilities are neglected in the Estonian language, or only used in narrow institutionalised areas (astronomy, medicine). The same goes for another word denoting observing – the Latin *spectare*. Hence notions such as retrospection or retrospective, introspective (hardly ever used in this culture), spectacle or a display or a performance. In order to consciously use different ways of observing these must first be acknowledged. For that purpose, they first have to be formulated linguistically.

### Weird 'green' retrospectacle

The current pictorial presentation of Estonia can primarily be called a retrospectacle – most of the picture-album displays have a dumbly past-flavoured nature. Besides natural sights (cliffs, cult trees, roots, flowers), the most frequent photographic objects in Estonian albums are thatched cottages, wells with draw beams, summer kitchens – all offering a weird concept of entire Estonia as a national open-air museum. These objects have more value the older they happen to be. Pictorial presentation of the present day, on the other hand, is hesitant and often even absurd. The reason is the crisis of national-cultural identity, or this notion acquiring the role of an empty denominator. We no longer seem to know what we actually look like on the world map. A state's trademark can obviously be an object or another, and not (raw) material. Thus attempts to turn limestone (!), for example, into a cult object belong among the most ridiculous, even incredible undertakings. We could equally take the famous Sillamäe uranium and promote Estonia as the smallest and most peaceful nuclear state. What makes the whole situation especially poignant is the fact that we started searching for the face of the nation-state at a time when the idea of a national union has long been buried. At the era of economic neo-colonialism the borders do not separate zones called states, but run between spheres of influence of multinational corporations. Perhaps because of such an identity crisis, people here try to stay dumbly or 'nordically' neutral and define Estonia pictorially through something that *no longer* exists, i.e. what was in the past; or through something that exists independently of us, i.e. nature. However, let us remember that this is a spectacle – a performance that, according to the French philosopher Guy Debord, is only possible in conditions of isolation (Debord 1994: 120ff). In order to have a share of the spectacle, one must in fact not participate in real events. History is obviously especially beneficial as a spectacle *locus* – people wrapped

in costumes—items of folk clothing on swings, stuffed humans with beer mugs, spinning-wheels, churns, black pudding and mead all put together make up the menu where the past ‘lives in the present’, but only in the form of a spectacle.

### **Impossibility of skipping stages of history**

There is presently a delusional idea prevailing in Estonia as if it were possible to skip entire stages in history, and jump effortlessly from the archaic past to real time. Tallinn based writer Hasso Krull has called Estonia the *culture of interruption*, but neglected to consider the subsequent serious cultural complications. The much hated Soviet Union was a total modernist utopia, and after its war machine had departed Estonia, the monuments of Kalinins, Lenins, *et al.*, were instantly taken apart. People tried to pretend as if all that had not happened, forgetting in their haste a much more significant factor. Namely that at the moment of being dragged into the USSR, Estonia was little more than a pre-modern agrarian province. Organically not joining the Soviet Union, this pre-modern world outlook was partially preserved, and its ‘development’ is still occasionally trying to persevere. As a disguise, all buildings, products, etc., bearing the prefix *eco-*, will do very nicely, although the post-industrial slogans fail to convince in a situation where we practically never had our own industrial identity. There is no point in denying that Estonia is still an anti-industrial state. Such an *interruptus* is especially obvious in the current visual representation. Why else is today’s Estonia represented in photographic performances where a chap sits at his PC in the middle of a rye field? Or why should we show foreigners the most common glass and metal office buildings, if complete confusion did not reign in our world outlook?

### **Estonian city: aesthetics of a neutron bomb**

According to the general pictorial presentation, Estonia seems to have only one city – Tallinn. In order to form ‘Estonia’ it is supplemented with individual objects from other inhabited places. A university comes from Tartu, a stronghold from Narva, castle ruins from Rakvere, beach hall from Pärnu. A similar situation became emblematic during the Soviet days when hierarchic gathering in most different areas and levels was a significant structural principle. Even a brief glance in the photo albums of earlier historic periods offers us a far more



balanced picture.<sup>4</sup> Despite that we immediately notice the weird definition of 'city' as a mere architectural environment. Here, too, promotional style dominates: newsreel or overview is in full force once again – we seem to be faced with catalogues or lists of architectural objects and elements of urban structure. One church follows another, then a third and a fourth; a wall and various streets, apparently photographed at 6 in the morning or on a Sunday when people usually stay at home. Despite the era, the ideal seems to be a certain cynical sterility and purity. The examples here could be the collection by Hanno Kompus, *Picturesque Estonia* of 1937; *Beautiful Homeland*, compiled by Karl Kesa and published in Germany (Kesa 1948); or Ann Tenno's numerous city-related publications in the 1990s. What is especially noticeable is the empty urban environment abounding with objects like a complex of sculptures, and not a trace of busy life anywhere. The latter tendency is more remarkable during the non-Soviet period.

In urban photographs the landscape's (stage) space is naturally replaced by another kind of tectonics – a vertically segmented environment without a horizon, where the most significant objects are emblemised phallo-centrally in the most direct sense of the word. Almost 99% of Tallinn is made up of Teutonic towers – during the Soviet period the cult of industry, typical of modern society, added unbecomingly numerous chimneys, cranes and monuments. This type of ridiculous church–church–chimney–crane–church–chimney line popped up in album after album, clumsily uniting the old and the new – past and future. The emphatic domination of vertical structures probably had their own ideological connotations: in fact all possible sorts of weird 'ancient' stone posts, pillars and columns were erected. These achievements and abilities, in the form of an imagological *tour de force*, were supposed to be shown at home and abroad. Thus the albums flaunted the chimneys of the Cellulose Factory or the Narva power station, TV tower, the Russalka monument, silhouettes of the harbour cranes, etc. The phallic façade menu also included, as an equal partner, the medieval architectural layers, the personified German gothic: the towers called Fat Margaret and Tall Hermann. Again – in a situation where each stone item and grey stretch of street has its own human-dimensional name, there are hardly any people to be seen in the street.

The Tallinn panorama, on the other hand, became an emblem and finally found a suitable place as a sticker on sprat tins. More important, however, is the

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Kompus 1937.

problem raised before. Elsewhere in the world the city is regarded as a multi-functional socio-critical environment, full of café life and humorous incidents, back yards and side streets, suspicious characters and the *nouveau riche*. Why then don't we see them in urban Estonian albums? Why have architectonic forms and structures been given such precedence; why are such stone and iron deserts so important?

### Creating heterotopia and shifting orthoscopia

The albums with a small print run of the STODOM group and Peeter Tooming, also Andres Kurg–Mari Laanemets, convince us that the pictorial presentation of a city, state or other units does not have to be purely panoramic/kaleidoscopic and an association founded on the 'wall-to-wall' menu of objects. Orthography teaches us the correct spelling, whereas *belles lettres* is mostly indebted to violating its rules – the same seems to apply in the world of the visual. We could use the notion of 'orthoscopia' or observing correctly, and claim that the latter should mean observing at eye level and during the daytime; using the 'normal objective', a clear close-up that makes the viewer 'unnoticeable'. Orthoscopia in photography has an unsuitable origin – it is a mixture of the ideals of painting (hopelessly out of date), limited understandings of the purely technological discourse about the 'correct depiction', and technical determinism dictated by photographic industry. Getting used to different ways of observing things and the scopic positions should become just as natural as the idea of a utopian and heterotopic space. It is certainly time to realise that the hidden is fascinating and the façade menu of reality, either coming from the Soviet period of today's tourist industry, is significantly devalued. Peeping, introspective, slumming, acknowledging the existence of the homeless and weirdos – the time for such easy-going human views has most certainly arrived. The more so that there are not 'two Estonias' as a common expression goes but many more. The mere thought of books focusing on nocturnal Estonia, espionage-Estonia, suburban Estonia, Estonia of the recent past, is worth more than all the published albums put together.

## Summary

Estonia exists in different textual modifications and sign systems. Their relations and mutual impact between them has not been extensively examined. Each such sign system models and communicates various aspects of 'Estonia', adding signs of itself along the way. The most widely spread formats circulating internationally about Estonia are photo albums, postcards and other iconic items. The albums in particular are influenced by the orthometric parameters of painting and the notion of 'picturesque'. In Estonia, oddly enough, the urban album hardly presents anything else than architecture and at best an empty environment. People, noosphere and social environment quite obviously do not qualify as urban. The reason is the long-term impact of visual ideology – kaleidoscopic overview-depiction, but also the modest level of visual literacy compared with mastering classical orthography. Objects offered in the visual façade menu mostly come from the past that refers to the functioning and vitality of the traditional model of culture in Estonia. Hence we have the concept of a city/state as first of all an (open-air) museum. The situation in 'pictorial Estonia' would be more interesting by the inclusion of heterotopic environment in the pictorial depiction, shifting the 'orthometric reality' and diversifying scopic positions.

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## Pildiline Eesti Kokkuvõte

Kõrvuti muude märgisüsteemide ja *agenda*'dega esineb semiootiline üksus *Eesti* ka visuaalsete teisikute vormis: albumite, vaatefilmide, kodulehekülgede ja postkaartide kujul. Võib isegi öelda, et füüsilis-geograafilised või poliitilis-administratiivsed moodustised eksisteerivadki suuresti tänu sellistele esitlustele, mis teevad nad "ülevaadatavaks". Eesti visuaalses ökonoomias on patoloogiliselt ülekaalus vaid säärased albumid, postkaardid jm. esitlusvormid, mis esindavad "fassaadi-imagoloogiat": nende raamkontseptsiooniks on utoopilise, mitte heterotoopilise ruumi mõiste. Sääraste esitluste menüü koosneb enamasti looduslikest vaatamisväärsustest, samuti kultustatakse arhitektuurilist keskkonda, mis viitab linnade tõlgendamisele pigem vabaõhumuuseumina kui elava ja mitmetahulise sotsiokultuurilise keskkonnana. Vaatamisväärsustena ei käsitleta paradoksaalselt ka lähiminevikuga seonduvaid kultuurilisi kehastusi: tööstus- ja inimmonumente, semantiliselt laetud piirkondi jne. Pildilise kujutamise viisid on säärase representatsioonide juures sarnased 19. sajandi omadele: nende keskseks ideeks on kujutelm "interjöriseeritud" vaatajast, kes jälgib passiivselt aknatagust maailma. Teemaatilisel on Eesti pildiesitlustes valdavad *möödunu* (minevik) ja *meist sõltumatu* (loodus) – viimased seigad viitavad traditsionalistliku kultuurimudeli valitsemisele veel tänaseski Eestis. "Pildilises Eestis" kujunenud olukorra muudaks huvitavamaks heterotoopilise keskkonna kaasamine, ortoskoopilise normaalsuse nihestamine ja skoopiliste positsioonide mitmekesistumine.