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The Last Relic
From a Genre Film
to a Genre Film

The given title actually summarises a vast majority of issues that are connected with Grigori Kromanov's *The Last Relic* (*Viimne reliikvia*, 1969), as well as pointing to the position the legendary film holds in Estonian film history. To some extent, we are dealing with almost the first film that, after a couple of comedies in our cinematography of that time, was consciously designed as a genre film (a historical-romantic adventure). On the other hand, it is a film that, in the shadow of its historical scenery, from within the conditional regulations of a genre film, was able to address and affect its contemporaries. It also had enormous popularity among the viewers both in Estonia and in the Soviet Union as a whole, as well as being distributed to more than 50 foreign countries.[1]

In talking about *The Last Relic,* one cannot just limit the topic to *The Relic* itself. The generic nature of *The Last Relic* and its significance in the film history of those days—in one way or another, one must also address the peculiarities of genre films in Soviet cinema and make a brief observation on some of the pages from the story of Soviet Estonian film-making. After which, it is necessary to analyse how *The Last Relic* connected to its contemporary cultural context and make an attempt to find possible parallels in the rest of the world.

HOW TO UNDERSTAND A GENRE FILM?

Actually we are dealing with two questions here. How, by using which key, should we interpret the events happening on the screen in one or another genre film? And secondly, what do we mean by the concept of 'genre film'? Let me address the latter question first.

The term genre systematises cinematographic landscape by combining films that share a common set of characteristics under a particular genre. The above-mentioned similarity or closeness might result from the addressed topic; for instance, curiously enough, a proper Western is delineated even in terms of its chronological and geographical setting (from the end of the American Civil War (1861–1865) up to the end of the 19th century, in the Western states of the US; see Jackson 1998: 277). The similarity can

also result from representational devices—for instance, a melodrama or an action film. Genre inherently involves tradition. Tradition can be tied to cultural memory; it can act as its bearer. A genre is nothing more than a means of implementing a rather significant cultural function. On the other hand, (genre) tradition stands for a set of certain rules and conventions.

Here we have come to the characteristics in the aspect which most interest us, and which solely belong to genre and the genre film. The rules of a genre dictate that there has to be laughter in a comedy and, similarly, song and dance is required in a musical. The rules are set not only for the action taking place on the screen but also for the audience. By equipping the latter with proper expectations (Hollywood movies mostly have happy endings with the only exception being that their formats might have altered throughout the years). At the same time, viewers are being offered a key or a code that can help them decipher what they see (since blood is an essential component of a gangster film, there is no need to feel intimidated by its presence).

Evidently all films can be categorised in certain genres. What is it that distinguishes a film categorised in a genre from a genre film proper, making some films 'genre films'?

A genre film is a film which communicates to viewers its belonging in a certain genre. It strongly suggests the fact that the film does not merely depict life but does it according to a specific set of generic rules. Naturally, the aforementioned does not claim to be an academic and all-inclusive definition; it is barely a brief working thesis. Yet, hopefully, in this case,

1   Concrete evidence of the exact number is missing. A publication of the studio Tallinnfilm, *Filmograafia "Tallinnfilm" 1973*, lists 43, or rather 42, countries (West Berlin is mentioned separately from West Germany), yet ends the list by adding 'etc., more than 20 other countries' (Tallinn, 1975, p. 49). The film's foreign distribution rights belonged to Sovexportfilm in Moscow. Studios were aware of the distribution of their films only as far as the scattered information from time to time somehow reached them. There has even been talk according to which *The Relic* was sold to foreign countries in a Soviet version with the songs performed by Georg Ots, an immensely popular Estonian singer and a celebrity all over the Soviet Union, accompanied by a great symphonic orchestra. In the original Estonian version, on the other hand, the songs (music by Uno and Tõnu Naissoo, lyrics by Paul-Eerik Rummo) were performed by Peeter Tooma in a much more contemporary style.

it is sufficient. *The Last Relic* is a historical adventure film, and therefore a genre film. From a film like this, we expect an exciting plot, and by 'historical' we mean it's necessary that the film have historical decor and not necessarily show the pursuit of historical truth. The criticism that *The Last Relic* was subjected to at the time of its release, accusing Grigori Kromanov of twisting the historical truth and almost humiliatingly criticising his genre selection, has proved to be rather inadequate (see, e.g., Link 1970).

In general, rules denote restrictions, which lead to simplification. A man on the screen stumbles and falls. We—watching a comedy—know that, okay, that's the place one should laugh, it is funny. In a gangster film, while watching the same scene we assume that the falling is caused by the man being shot and killed and we therefore decipher the image accordingly (at the beginning of the 1930s, the first days of sound films, the scene would have been accompanied by a loud noise of automatic fire, while with today's Dolby SR just a click from a silencer is sufficient, a reflection of the latest developments in audio-technology and weaponry). Yes, perhaps my example is an exaggeration, but only up a certain extent. At the same time, it points out the reception of specificity in genre films.

Realistic psychological drama can probably be considered the broadest of all genres, enjoying relative generic liberty. It is precisely in comparison and contrast to this genre that the simplified and limited depiction of life in genre films are usually discussed.

It is no problem for a musical to make people sing and dance on the streets, even in the rain (*Singin' in the Rain*, 1952). We would suggest that it looks perfectly natural and believable, even true—within the rules and under the conditions of a chosen genre. It would be a totally different matter if we attempted to adapt such singing and dancing to a conventional drama.[2] It becomes clear that a genre is not always as broad and relatively unrestrained as it may appear, and—even more importantly—not in every aspect. To explicate: a realistic psychological drama, like any other film genre, has its own set of rules, although they are much more complex and diversified (allowing

for deceptive freedom), involving more than chronological and geographical setting, as in Westerns.

The limitations of genre films do not just involve restrictions; they can also act as pathways to freedom that would be unthinkable in realistic films. The well-known culturologist Mikhail Yampolsky writes: 'It is a general rule that, when compared to realistic films, a genre film exists in a much more closed linguistic system.' And he continues in connection with the more open system of realistic films: 'From one angle, it enormously broadens the artist's formal possibilities (the openness of a system). Yet, from another angle, by cutting out the absurd, the fantastic, music etc.—all the components which do not fit into the basic system—it harshly limits the field of these possibilities.' (Yampolsky 1991: 64−65.)

LIGHT SPECTRUM OF *KOORDI*

The Last Relic is an adventure film about a 'free man' named Gabriel (Aleksandr Goloborodko). His destiny brings him in contact with the 'best horseback rider in Livonia', Hans von Risbieter (Raivo Trass), and Agnes (Ingrīda Andriņa), who escapes from von Risbieter on horseback, and is therefore obviously a better rider than Hans. In the name of long-desired happiness or, more precisely, for Agnes's sake, Gabriel has to cross swords with a number of men during the film. He also has to stand up to Brother Johannes (Rolan Bykov) who by marrying Agnes to Hans hopes to attain for the church secret relics that were bequeathed to Hans by his father on his deathbed—the episode that opens the film.

The film ends with a great celebration. Gabriel frees Agnes in the nick of time, just before she is sent to a nunnery. A secondary couple of young lovers (the traditional varlet and chamber maid) have also found each other; in this film they are represented by the peasant Siim (Uldis Vadziks) and the nun Ursula (Eve Kivi). Rebels destroy the holy relic, stating triumphantly that their relic is their freedom.

The finale is reminiscent of another celebration, of another finale, of another film from Estonian chrestomatic film history, which is totally different from *The Relic*. I have in mind

Herbert (aka Gerbert) Rappaport's[3] *Light in Koordi* (*Valgus Koordis*, 1951) and the collective farmers' celebration in its closing episode. The celebration is graced by a gigantic portrait of Stalin.

How are these two films similar? The films are not merely different; they are complete opposites of each other in terms of their content and pathos. Yet, they are closer to each other than they seem initially. The similarities are apparent in other aspects besides their endings. Namely, they are both genre films. Besides, there are songs performed in *Koordi* as well, and the functional relations of the songs to the film plot are rather similar to the ones in *The Last Relic*. However, in the case of *Koordi,* its generic features as a fairy-tale are not emphasised and Rappaport's work is claimed to be a perfect example of 'true-bred' socialist realism in Soviet Estonian film.

A few words about what happens in *Light in Koordi*: it is 1945, the war has barely ended. Saying farewell to his Russian-speaking brother-in-arms on the train steps, Paul Runge (Georg Ots) returns to his home village. The following story depicts Runge's, as well as his fellow villagers', agricultural difficulties. The hardships are intensified by the activities of the new government's opponents: a tractor driver (Ants Eskola), having freshly arrived in the village, turns out to be a wolf in sheep's clothing, trying to sabotage the spring ploughing routines. In a dramatic climax, Runge's dwellings are set on fire. Naturally, the secret actions of the enemies are brought to light. In the course of the story, a delegation of the villagers pays a visit to another village in Russia—the village of Runge's brother-in-arms, seen in the opening scenes of the film. After the villagers see the advantages of the collective farms in Russia, one is also established in Koordi. In the epilogue, we witness how, almost miraculously, life has drastically changed in Koordi: its people are singing and dancing around a fountain in national costumes, giving praise and glory to Joseph Stalin himself. The apotheosis is explicit, a literal illustration of the postulate of socialist realism 'national in form, socialist in content'.[4]

How is the collective farm established? Naturally, with the help of the Orwellian Big

Brother: the Russian collective farm acts as a role model. Yet, there is even more. Almost every time the Communist Party organiser Muuli (Il-mar Tammur), or somebody else, brings up the topic of forming a kolkhoz, the panning camera and/or proper framing reveals Stalin's portrait on the wall. Principally, there is nothing unique about the film. Consider, for instance, Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). As we remember, the General is, at first glance, one against many when he makes the mad decision to save Private Ryan but, just in the nick of time, the camera manages to meaningfully catch in its focus the stripes of the US flag, peeking out from behind the General (Kärk 2000: 147).

Everything connected to the Communist Party in *Koordi* has a magical meaning attached to it. It is precisely a Party worker who puts forth the idea of forming a collective farm. The person who reveals the deceptive nature of the public enemy is also a Party member. And finally, in the episode of the fire on Runge's farm, when somebody is calling for help, they simply yell at the operator: 'Put me through to the Party!' Indeed, who needs a fireman when you can call the all-mighty Party?

Now, I'd like to say a couple of words about the actual reality of those days and of Soviet Estonian life in the country side, which Hans Leberecht's novel (1948 in Russian, 1949 in Estonian), the literary source of Rappaport's 1951 adaptation, was meant to address. Post-war land reform, which redistributed the land of the so-called public enemies ('kulaks'—*кулакс* in Russian) to paupers, turning them into new-land receivers, suddenly took a sharp turn. In May 1947 the Political Bureau in Moscow passed a resolution regarding the formation of

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2   Yes, by referring to Terence Davies (*Distant Voices, Still Lives*, 1988; *The Long Day Closes*, 1992) I risk being opposed; however, his poetic and personal world is really a great exception to the generic rules.

3   Born in Vienna in 1908, Rappaport emigrated to the Soviet Union in 1936. In Cyrillic his name is spelled Герберт, and thus several sources identify him as Gerbert Rappaport.

4   Boris Kõrver, who composed the film's songs, was given straightforward directions, according to which the song being sung in this episode had to be of a national character (a program on Estonian Television (ETV), aired April 25, 1988).

collective farms in the Republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Both land and the inventory, under the slogan of becoming a part of the possession of collective farms, were taken even from people to whom they had just been generously given. The first collective farm (*коллективное хозяйство* in Russian, *колхоз* or kolkhoz in short) was established in Estonia on September 6, 1947 in Saaremaa. 'Agriculture was mostly collectivised in 1949–50; the peak of collectivisation appeared in spring 1949; by March 20, 1949, 8.1% of the farms had been collectivised; by May 25, it was 71.1%, by January 1, 1950, 80% and by the end of 1950, 91.6%', according to the encyclopaedia *Soviet Estonia* (*Nõukogude Eesti*; NE 1978: 78). *Light in Koordi*, thus, served an important political purpose, accompanying the rapidly changing times in Soviet Estonian villages.

The changes were drastic indeed, especially in the spring of 1949, when in two months the number of collective farmers increased by nearly a factor of nine. Yet, during the entire next year, in 1950, it increased by only 10%. Naturally, we know what in fact stands behind the miraculous percentage of growth: the notorious mass deportation of March 25–29, 1949, during which 20,700 people were forcefully deported from their homes (80% of them women, children and the elderly; see EE 2002: 316). As a comparison, in 1947 544,000 people lived in the countryside, and the deportation mostly applied to country people. Therefore, it is relatively safe to say that approximately 4% of the rural population was deported by force. It was the greatest single act of repression of all time in Estonia and was especially hideous because of the great number of women, children and the elderly among the deported. Approximately 3,000 people died in exile, and the plans of the Soviets were initially even greater, including 7,500 families and altogether 22,000 people to be deported; an additional 1,900 families were to be deported later (EE 2002: 316).

I can certainly understand Evald Laasi's feelings when he objected to the film both as a simple viewer at the time of its production and decades later as a historian (Laasi 1988: 62). Indeed, the discrepancy between what happened on the screen and the forced collectivisation was

more than astonishing. However, *Light in Koordi* was not meant to depict or even reflect actual life. Nor is it a question of the 'visiting director' Herbert Rappaport not being able to show the (mass) deportations—even if he had wished to do so—on the screen.

Light in Koordi is in fact a 'dream film' (Elmanovitš 1984: 19). With the same level of carefulness, responsibility and literalness as it illustrated the 'national character' of Soviet art, e.g. by showing dancers in national costumes in the closing episode, *Koordi* tried to present the central postulate of socialist realism: the depiction of reality in a stage of revolutionary development, with the better, socialist tomorrow appearing, mirage-like, in the shadows of today. Admittedly, the film gets a bit carried away, which is why it was only awarded the Second Degree of the State Stalin Prize.

Koordi, then, presented a utopian reality instead of a real one. In place of the indicative mood it used the optative, a mood indicating a wish or a hope. But the significance of a socialist realist piece of art will not yield to simple games of different grammatical moods.

Vladimir Propp, who in his *The Historical Roots of the Wonder Tale* (*Исторические корни волшебной сказки*, 1946) studied the relations between fairy-tales and reality, states towards the end of his study: 'A tale [he means a fairy-tale—*L. K.*] is a verbal charm, rare in its kind, a means of influencing the surrounding world.' (Propp 1998: 431.) This also applies to socialist realist artistic production, as well as to its relationship with reality. Furthermore, it provides explanations for the questionably mimetic features of a socialist realist film. The relationship between what is happening on the screen and in real life does not (so much) reflect the actual as model and signify it. It is actually the screen that holds the primary position and reality is secondary; it is up to reality to catch up with the cinematic representation, to be the mimesis of it![5]

THERE'S AIR IN THE AIR

Another text we can compare with *The Last Relic* originates from the time the film was produced. I am referring to *The Cinderella Game*

(*Tuhkatriinumäng*, 1969) by Paul-Eerik Rummo, and Evald Hermaküla's stage version if it at the Tartu Vanemuine Theatre.

Mardi Valgemäe, who has spared no effort in propagating one of the most outstanding works of Estonian dramaturgy and theatrical innovation of the 1960s and 1970s, characterises *The Cinderella Game* as 'an allegorical play that poses sharp questions about unlimited authority and the meaning of life. Based on well-known fairy-tale motifs, *The Cinderella Game* suggests that modern man resembles a puppet, constantly changing roles in a politicised parlour game. Furthermore, as life seems to be directed by chance, all the noble yearnings lose their meaning over time.' (Valgemäe 1990: 72.) And a couple of pages later: 'Rummo's play, in the Ionescan spirit, distances itself from the mechanical world and moves towards Beckett's humanism, along the way shading everything it touches with a deeply universal tint, hidden beneath a shell of absurdity.' (Valgemäe 1990: 83.)[6] Associating the avant-garde and innovative *Cinderella Game* with the blockbuster *Last Relic* (the mention seems to be tongue-in-cheek) might have felt modern during a modernist oriented period. Yet, the comparison was not drawn back in those days.

Nevertheless, similarities can be found, starting with the main characters. The scriptwriter of *The Last Relic,* Arvo Valton, as a result of disputes with the director Kromanov, managed to add some rather Hamletian statements, e.g. 'today I am not the man I was yesterday', to Gabriel's lines. Most important, however, is what takes place in the castle and in the monastery, even though, according to the author's vision, the castle is not even present on the stage in *The Cinderella Game*.

The prince has arrived in a house where, nine years previously, he found his Cinderella. Now he doubts whether the Cinderella he married is the right one, and thinks that perhaps she was secretly changed to the 'wrong' one. Indeed, it turns out that there are many Cinderellas, and that the Lady of the House has sent her Cinderellas, or rather fake-Cinderellas, and eavesdroppers to all the palaces in the world. In this way, the humble dwelling that once accommodated the Cinderella of the doubting Prince is actually more of a palace than all the real palaces together. For it is precisely here, under the command of the mighty Lady of the House, that all the strings from all the palaces are being pulled. Which is exactly what happens in the monastery of *The Last Relic*, with the help of a network of monk-eavesdroppers. The Lady of the House in *The Cinderella Game* resembles Brother Johannes from the monastery in *The Last Relic*, a Grey Cardinal, who from behind the walls of the monastery plays the games of chess and power.

Therefore, *The Cinderella Game* and *The Relic* both depict, basically, the same phenomenon, although in different artistic languages. That is, they show power from behind the scenes, the secret mechanisms of the world order. Inspired by a remark in the text, Evald Hermaküla, in staging the play, made use of the technical possibilities of the freshly finished Vanemuine Theatre hall[7] and designed the horizontal stage decorations to move up and down, revealing the usually hidden side of the theatre's and life's naked backstage (the art director of the play was Liina Pihlak). It would be similar to an experience in which, instead of the ordinary Windows environment, one were suddenly faced with a DOS maze or, to be more exact, what is actually happening in the computer.

We have here, on the one hand, a powerful manifestation of radical theatre innovations and, on the other, the 'great loner'[8] of Estonian

5   Joseph Stalin's notorious *History of the CPSU (B) Short Course* (1939) functioned similarly as the 'means for magic influence on the surrounding world'.

6   About the play see also Valgemäe 1970.

7   The new building was completed for the 50th Anniversary of The Great October Revolution, in autumn 1967. Editors' note: the indigenous theatre Vanemuine (established in 1870), a landmark for Estonian cultural independence and the beginning of Estonian professional theatre, which was built according to a project by Finnish architect Armas Lindgren in 1906, caught fire during a battle of World War II in 1944 and its ruins were completely destroyed in order to make room for the new building.

8   Soviet Estonian film had been created by decree and answered directly to Moscow (differently from other art forms in Estonia), and – on the one hand, being imported, and on the other, lacking a proper tradition – it gained the reputation of being a 'great loner'. Lennart Meri has argued that 'against the background of this intense and many-sided cultural process, we sense, extra sharply, the characteristics of a transplant in our film: it has been implanted but not switched into the republic's creative circulation.' (Meri 1968.)

culture taking his firsts steps in the field of commercial films, amongst all the accompanying temptations. This seems more than contradictory. Yet, at the same time, there is something very similar to, even overlapping with, what we just witnessed. They are very close indeed in their content, yet not in artistic form, the opposite case to the association with *Koordi*.

The initiator of *The Relic*'s 'tube-mail' and monks-eavesdropper's carrier pigeons was the editor of the film, Lennart Meri. Of course, he was not yet the president of Estonia, but his political wits demanded expression! One might ask, half-seriously: did he—while giving instructions for how Brother Johannes would pull the strings—think of the similarity to the orders left beneath the wash-basin in *The Cinderella Game*. Despite the direct links between the two—Paul-Eerik Rummo was also the author of the lyrics of *The Relic*'s songs—I still consider the parallels between the film and *The Cinderella Game* to be mostly indirect and era-specific.

Speaking of the specifics of the era, *The Relic* can be approached from two different angles. Firstly, there is the spirit of the 'golden sixties'. Arvo Valton has recalled:

> To talk about what we finally arrived at and why we started to make the film in the first place, the central idea behind it was how to solve the character of Gabriel. Viewers can decide for themselves whether it had to do with the spirit of the 1960s and the accompanying moods, but we saw our hero as a doubting intellectual, a free man who doesn't want to pick sides, and who therefore in life is left in the open fire of all the fighting parties. However, in a romantic film, one can also sometimes become the winner by oneself. (Valton 1990: 76.)

Secondly, there is the fact of August 21, 1968 and the Soviet tanks in the streets of Prague. Powerlessness. Protest.

I would like to consider here a recollection of those days by Paul-Eerik Rummo. Rather than Kromanov's memories (see Kromanov 1995), we prefer here another recollection, which was commissioned for the theatre section of the journal *Theatre. Music. Cinema* (*Teater.*

Muusika. Kino), and where, therefore, the possible immediate connections to *The Relic* were not initially programmed into the text.

> In a personal framework, I associate August 1968 with the Theatre Union's summer cottage in Vääna-Jõesuu. [---] Right in the middle of the lawn I had a desk constructed on top of two stools where I wrote the lyrics to the film *The Last Relic*, at the same time keeping an eye on my child while my wife was at the river washing nappies. At night, we used to listen to the radio—the announcements and news from Czechoslovakia. The entire scenery brought together a totality—the little child, late summer and the gypsy lifestyle. The spirits typical of the knight-errants in *The Last Relic* combined with the euphoria of a struggle for freedom fading not very far away. (Rummo 1988: 71.)

It can be assumed that the reality cutting sharply into the production of *The Relic* gave a special 'power' to the songs, as is noted nowadays. Probably, either *The Relic* or Miloš Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) would not have been as filled with a sense of freedom had their creators not personally felt the angst of a totalitarian regime. The social order, or the particular year of 1968, is not directly reflected in *The Relic* (similarly to *Cuckoo's Nest*, although Forman didn't have to fear censorship). The reflection is more incidental, not necessarily conscious, but at the same time even more immediate and overwhelming.

The year 1968 and the Estonian film are completely separate topics. The year 1968 was one of the most productive in Estonian film history. This also applies to documentaries. An entirely new page was turned in Estonian documentary film-making with Andres Sööt's *511 Best Photographs of Mars* (*511 paremat fotot Marsist*) and Grigori Kromanov's *Our Arthur* (*Meie Artur*). The feature film *Madness* (*Hullumeelsus*) by Kaljo Kiisk, from that year, is one of the best Estonian films ever.

Film dramaturgy, which had, up until that time, been a 'problem child' dependent on literature, as if hanging on by a leash of

adaptations, finally reached a new level and new freedom in *Madness*.[9] The film's events take place during the final stage of World War II, in a seemingly formally anti-fascist spirit, which was very much accepted by the Soviet authorities. Actually Kiisk's *Madness* was one of the very few Soviet films, if not the only one, besides Mikhail Romm's *Ordinary Fascism* (*Обыкновенный фашизм*, 1965) containing criticism of a totalitarian regime, including criticism of the Soviet system in particular. The final scenes of *Madness* concentrate on Jüri Järvet's character's direct look at his viewers, a reference to *Ordinary Fascism,* where also in the finale we see human eyes in a close-up (Romm gave us a look at the victims of totalitarianism, with the painful look from those being killed in concentration camps; Kiisk presented us with the maddened look of a totalitarianism's lackey and executioner).[10] The social calibre of the film can be best measured by the fact that it was banned and could be shown only in the Estonian SSR (see Mathiesen 1993: 76–89). Not just the new wave of Estonian films, in both fiction films and documentaries, but also the *rising* wave of Estonian films were abruptly interrupted. Kaljo Kiisk's *Madness* brought an era in Estonian film history to its end.

To what degree did the end of the more liberal atmosphere of the 1960s influence the art world of the following years? The saga of *Madness* indispensably left its mark, paralysing the development of Estonian feature films for quite a while. At the same time, it would be incorrect to assume that any productive artistic activities were totally unthinkable during the following decades. Soviet Estonian artistic practice, rather, displayed different moods. As always, the reality did not follow the path it was offered and instead evolved differently. For instance, the peaks of Soviet Estonian literature, such as *The Czar's Madman* (*Keisri hull*) by Jaan Kross and *The Autumn Ball: Scenes of City Life* (*Sügisball: stseenid linnaelust*) by Mati Unt, were published in 1978 and 1979, during the oppressive stagnation period.

'There's everything in the air; there's air in the air,' Paul-Eerik Rummo's soaking wet joker sang in his farewell in the memorable year 1968.

THE RELIC
AND THE OTHERS

The Relic can also be associated with its closer relatives and genre-mates in ways other than the examples given above. Let us point out a few of these.

Firstly, there is the romantic adventure by the Frenchman Christian-Jacque, *Fan-Fan the Tulip* (*Fanfan la Tulipe*, 1952). The connection becomes obvious when reading one of the early versions of *The Relic*'s script. *The Last Relic of the Monastery of Marienthal*, as the project was entitled early on, started with a voice-over about an Estonian peasant who has been cultivating his barely arable land, and how from the beginning of time our closer and more distant neighbours have been 'movingly' interested in this land and the work of our peasants, wanting to save the scarce land from his and each others' hands (Valton 1990: 28). And both the 'moving interest' and 'saving' the land from each other actually have other meanings.

The exact same inverted history is presented in the initial voice-over of *Fan-Fan the Tulip*: 'Once upon a time there was a wonderful land called France. [---] With roses on their guns and smiles on their lips, the regiments of Picardy, Aquitaine and Burgundy fought elegantly, killing with grace and disembowelling with style.' It is not important whether Valton, when writing his screenplay, consciously thought about *Fan-Fan the Tulipe*, or if the film influenced him in some way. The alluding to previous generic examples also belongs to generic rules. While doing that, Valton's text remains perfectly characteristic of his writings and the inside-out logic is very much his own style.

Actually, the voice-over commentary in the earlier script version is one of a few connecting links between *The Relic* and *Fan-Fan the Tulipe*. Christian-Jacque's film is principally a genre classic, yet somewhat too simplistic. In

9   Estonian film dramaturgy has been dealt with in Valdeko Tobro's *Literature and Film* (*Kirjandus ja film*, 1972).

10   The associations and possible parallels of *Madness*—or the lack of them, *Madness*'s innovativeness and originality—to the things happening in the world definitely deserve to be treated separately.

The Relic the extra-diegetic text is transformed during the following changes into songs that add comments to the film plot.

Another film that should be mentioned in connection with *The Relic* is *Tom Jones* (1963) by the Englishman Tony Richardson. It seems as if the inspiration for the saloon scene in which Agnes and Gabriel heartily chew on a shank of meat came directly from Richardson's film (Elmanovitš 1995: 525). However, there are other issues more relevant than the mentioned immediate similarity.

In the English cinema of the early 1960s, social realism, or kitchen sink drama, was predominant. The young and the furious in literature, theatre and film dealt with their contemporary times; they were critical and ferocious. However, in 1963 another outstanding British film director besides Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson (*Look Back in Anger*, 1958; *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, 1962) seemed to take a U-turn and brought to the screen a romantic adventure film dressed in historical costumes—*Tom Jones* (the screenplay, based on the novel by Henry Fielding, was written by John Osborne, who in title of one of his plays provided a name for the young and the furious themselves).

In the case of *The Relic* we can talk about a somewhat similar situation, both in connection with the general trends of Estonian film (social criticism of the 1960s) and more directly with Kromanov's associations (his earlier films *What Happened to Andres Lapateus?* (*Mis juhtus Andres Lapateusega?*, 1966) and *Our Arthur*, which were quite innovative works). In the case of *Tom Jones,* there was talk about the frisky form, about a much more modern, Godardian use of visual language within the limits of the chosen genre.[11] Kromanov also succeeded in giving an extra nuance to the usual spectacular quality. Valdeko Tobro has written mostly about the Brechtian alienation effect that was achieved through the songs (Tobro 1972: 70). I would prefer not to speculate here on whether, in referring to Godard or Brecht, one should look for specific (ideological) background or not. At the moment, what is important is that in both films old genres were decisively dusted off.

As a matter of fact, there are songs used in *Jones* as well. Although here, instead of the similarities, the differences should be addressed. At the end of the film, when the main character is waiting in his cell to be brought out for execution, a song plays in the background. This sad song speaks of dangling on a rope, the destiny awaiting the poor Tommy. There is also a sad song played in *The Relic*, when Gabriel hears from a saloon whore about Agnes's engagement. While in *Tom Jones* the song is directly, by the name it mentions, connected to the plot of the film, in *The Relic* the song remarkably broadens the story presented on the screen, addressing issues that deal with selling oneself, as well as heavenly love and justice appearing in one's dreams (Rummo 1985: 194).

Now it is appropriate to ask whether *The Relic*, in trying to offer a refreshing treatment of a well-known genre, was an exception in Soviet cinematography? Inevitably, that's where the Soviet Estonian film also belonged, being led by Goskino (USSR State Committee for Cinematography, Государственный комитет по кинематографии СССР); this is the first context to which we should draw parallels when speaking of the Estonian film of those days. So, were there analogues to be found in *The Relic*?

Yes, there were. In 1966, *Elusive Revengers* (*Неуловимые мстители*) was completed in Mosfilm by Edmond Keosayan. It was a youth film depicting the Civil War and battles between the Reds and the Whites, which grew out of the oft-filmed historical-revolutionary themes. Speaking of genres, we are dealing with a Western here. As one may recall, one of the chief conditions of a true-bred Western was the placement of its story in the second half of the 19th century in the American Wild West. If we were to understand this condition in the light of the historical aspect of the development of the United States as an independent country, the unexpected generic choice does not appear as unexpected after all: the period of the Russian Civil War and the struggle to establish a new state in the Soviet Union were very similar to the historical context of Westerns in the US.

The vastly popular *Revengers* had two sequels. In the first of them, *New Adventures*

of the Elusives (*Новые приключения неуловимых*, 1968), Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Western classics were clearly alluded to. Yet, that was not the only aspect that caught one's eye. The only lyrical-nostalgic song speaking about Russia's great broad open spaces was performed by a Whiteguard, that is an opponent of the new government. The representation of the the opposing Whites, which up to that point had been purely negative, mostly caricatured also in the *Revengers*, now obtained another, more serious, meaning.

The Estonian *Relic* is no different. Kromanov's attempt to renew the genre film was synchronised with similar ambitions in the rest of Soviet cinema. One might mention here, for instance, Vladimir Motyl's *White Sun of the Desert* (*Белое солнце пустыни*, 1970), a film which was produced almost in parallel with *The Relic*. Associating oneself either in connection with or in opposition to previous generic experiences is an inseparable part of genre films and is, in fact, its essence. Keosayan had the chance to base his film on, and at the same time also oppose it genre-wise to, the long tradition of historical-revolutionary films. Kromanov lacked such an option. The entire conscious experience of the Soviet Estonian genre film was limited to a couple of comedies, one of the best of them probably being *Mischievous Curves* (*Vallatud kurvid*, 1959) by Juli Kun and Kaljo Kiisk.

As mentioned above, one of the closest films to *The Relic* would definitely be *Tom Jones*. However, bearing in mind that 'the modern use of a classic historical plot creates a cinematographic spectacle', as was pointed out by Valdeko Tobro in his review of *The Relic* (Tobro 1982: 152), a more brilliant example from the times of *The Relic*, addressing the contemporary times in the shadow of historicism, would be *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) by Arthur Penn. (Incidentally, the film was originally to be directed by François Truffaut, one of the chief figures of the French New Wave, and it was actually precisely from the French *Nouvelle Vague* that all the genre bubbles of 1960s films were initiated.)

Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* presented on the screen the United States after its great economic depression of 1929 and therefore it is not surprising that the film is considered to be one of the initiators of the 'retro trend'. On the other hand, the story, which deals with the bank robbers Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrows, also refers to the time of its production. In a film about two historical miscreants, Penn in fact spoke about his contemporaries, the 1960s youth movement, and about the hippies who—like Bonnie—abandoned their comfortable homes, about rebellious and protesting spirits. By doing so, Penn addressed both the violence of the entire society and that of his characters, whose choices made it impossible for them to return to their everyday lives. Arthur Penn's genre film is one of the most serious insights on 1960s youth protests. We could compare *Bonnie and Clyde* to the celebrated representative of art-house cinema, *Zabriskie Point* (1970) by Michelangelo Antonioni, or to *Easy Rider* (1969) by Dennis Hopper, a film which can be compared to *Bonnie and Clyde* in that it was a road movie, although it refers to the 1960s in a more immediate manner.

Naturally, in the United States the tradition of genre films has been different from the European tradition. One might say that Hollywood is mostly all about genre films. American cinema has established itself mostly with the help of the genre film and via the genre film. Vivid and critical pictures of the society of the United States are provided in both the social realist *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) by John Ford and in the gangster film *The Godfather* (1972) by Francis Ford Coppola. They are, though different, equally good films, with each using its specific creative devices. It is rather understandable that the renewal of film in the States, the New Hollywood (Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese *et al.*) of the beginning of the 1970s, often manifested itself through genre films, adding innovative edges to them.

There are several other films that could be compared to *The Relic*. Here it was relevant for us to point both at the closer as well as more

11   See, e.g., Duncan Petrie: '...the varying speeds, jump cutting, and direct address to camera, inspired by the early work of Godard.' (Petrie 1997: 605.)

distant contexts in which Kromanov's film was produced and which more or less also were present in *The Relic*. This, in turn, enables us to define *The Relic*'s position in Estonian film history.

To summarise, the 1960s generic innovations also reached the contemporary Soviet cinema, as well as Estonian film. At the same time, in the limited legacy of Estonian films, the tradition of genre films was practically missing. While consciously starting out with the intention of directing a genre film, Grigori Kromanov ended up as a pioneer. This is exactly why his sensitivity in dealing with what was happening in world cinema needs to be praised. *The Last Relic,* produced in 1969, represents new views of the genre film and points to its possibilities.

FILMS

511 Best Photographs of Mars (*511 paremat fotot Marsist*), dir. Andres Sööt. Estonia, 1968

Bonnie and Clyde, dir. Arthur Penn. USA, 1967

Distant Voices, Still Lives, dir. Terence Davies. UK, 1988

Easy Rider, dir. Dennis Hopper. USA, 1969

Elusive Revengers (*Неуловимые мстители*), dir. Edmond Keosayan. Russia, 1966

Fan-Fan the Tulip (*Fanfan la Tulipe*), dir. Christian-Jacque. Italy, France, 1952

The Godfather, dir. Francis Ford Coppola. USA, 1972

The Grapes of Wrath, dir. John Ford. USA, 1940

The Last Relic (*Viimne reliikvia*), dir. Grigori Kromanov. Estonia, 1969

Light in Koordi (*Valgus Koordis*), dir. Herbert Rappaport. Russia (Estonia), 1951

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, dir. Tony Richardson. UK, 1962

The Long Day Closes, dir. Terence Davies. UK, 1992

Look Back in Anger, dir. Tony Richardson. UK, 1958

Madness (*Hullumeelsus*), dir. Kaljo Kiisk. Estonia, 1968

Mischievous Curves (*Vallatud kurvid*), dir. Juli Kun, Kaljo Kiisk. Estonia, 1959

New Adventures of the Elusives (*Новые приключения неуловимых*), dir. Edmond Keosayan. Russia, 1968

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, dir. Miloš Forman. USA, 1975

Ordinary Fascism (*Обыкновенный фашизм*), dir. Mikhail Romm. Russia, 1965

Our Arthur (*Meie Artur*) dir. Grigori Kromanov. Estonia, 1968

Saving Private Ryan, dir. Steven Spielberg. USA, 1998

Singin' in the Rain, dir. Stanley Donen, Gene Kelly. USA, 1952

Tom Jones, dir. Tony Richardson. UK, 1963

What Happened to Andres Lapateus?
(*Mis juhtus Andres Lapateusega?*),
dir. Grigori Kromanov. Estonia, 1966

White Sun of the Desert (*Белое
солнце пустыни*), dir. Vladimir Motyl.
Russia, 1970

Zabriskie Point, dir. Michelangelo
Antonioni. USA, 1970

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