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LOST AND FOUND: URBAN AND RURAL SPACES
IN CONTEMPORARY ESTONIAN CINEMA

Master's Thesis

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*The history of geographical maps is
the notebook of historical semiotics.*

Yuri Lotman

Universe of the Mind
(Lotman 2001 [1991], p. 177)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is concerned with the cinematic representations of urban and rural spaces in contemporary Estonian cinema in relation to national identity discourse. It identifies a distinctive ‘*motif of the road*’ in a corpus of Estonian films - *The Highway Crossing*, *Made in Estonia*, *Mindless*, *186 Kilometers* and *The Temptation of St. Tony* - of the late 1990s and 2000s characterised by the portrayal of the journey undertaken by city-dweller protagonist(s) between urban and rural spaces, and investigates the ways these personal spatial traverses are interwoven with the national trajectory of post-Soviet transition through which contemporary Estonian filmmakers articulate their critique on Estonia’s search for new identity and the process of Westernisation, in particular the paradoxical effects of pursuing a modern free-market economy. Through an analysis of the spatial modelling within the films in light of Yuri Lotman’s cultural semiotics, particularly his ‘notion of boundary’ and the aspect of its crossing, it is argued that these films capture the ‘*border-spaces*’, the peripheral areas of tension and dialogue between internal space (urban) and external space (rural), and that the filmmakers’ manipulation of space coupled with the use of the road motif engages in the wider reassessment and reinterpretation of the contested relationship between landscape and Estonian national identity that has emerged in the Estonian society after regaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. This dissertation is also an attempt to explore the potential of Lotmanian semiotics of culture as a method for film analysis, more specifically the usefulness of his conceptualisation of boundary in our reading of cinematic landscape. By contextualising contemporary representations of cinematic urban and rural spaces under discussion within Soviet-/ Estonian film history, it seeks to investigate the relationship between aesthetic continuity and innovation.

Keywords: Estonian Cinema; Post-Soviet Cinema; Cinematic Landscape; Urban and Rural Spaces; National Identity; Semiotics

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LIST OF FILMS ANALYSED

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The Highway Crossing (1999)

Ristumine peateega
Directed by Arko Okk

Made in Estonia (2003)

Vanad ja kobedad saavad jalad alla
Directed by Rando Pettai

Mindless (2006)

Meeletu
Directed by Elmo Nüganen

186 Kilometers (2007)

Jan Uuspõld läheb Tartusse
Directed by Andres Maimik and Rain Tolk

The Temptation of St. Tony (2009)

Püha Tõnu kiusamine
Directed by Veiko Õunpuu

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary Estonian cinema evokes the image of a distant relative, between known and unknown, affinity and remoteness. On the one hand, we witness Estonia's rapid re-integration into the Western world following the restoration of independence in 1991 after almost half a century of Soviet rule, in particular its accessions to the European Union and NATO in 2004, and its participation in the Eurozone in 2011. On the other hand, Estonian cinema remains on the periphery of the European and global cinescape; a vivid and distinctive image has yet to be established¹. As compare with other post-communist cinemas in the region that have generally garnered critical attention subsequent to the collapse of the Soviet regime, Estonian cinema is still relatively unknown to international audience ²and under-explored by film scholars³. Until very recently have we witnessed the emergence of a modest but growing body of literature.⁴ These studies either treat Estonian cinema as a prime object of enquiry by drawing attention to its historical and contemporary developments or, of greater prevalence in current scholarship, consider it under the rubric of wider contexts such as Baltic cinemas, post-Soviet cinemas, Central European cinemas or cinemas of

¹ Estonian animation, as an exception, is well acclaimed in international film festivals during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods (for a comprehensive account on Estonian animation history see Robinson 2003).

² It is worth drawing attention to two major specificities of Estonia attributing to the orientation of its cinema towards domestic audience: the small-sized population of less than 1.3 million (Statistics Estonia 2013) and the linguistic distinctiveness of Estonian, the mother tongue of less than 1.1 million speakers (VisitEstonia), which belongs to the Finno-Ugric language family among Finnish, Hungarian and others. Currently, Estonian cinema has a small annual output of three to four full-length feature films, many of which are substantially subsidised through official funding bodies, namely, Ministry of Culture, Cultural Endowment and Estonian Film Institute (formerly, Estonian Film Foundation) (COMPENDIUM 2012).

³ According to Jaan Ruus, cinema in the Estonian context has traditionally received far less local critical attention than other art forms, this is largely due to the general opinion that filmmakers were attached with 'chains of propaganda' during the Soviet era, thus cinema was more of 'an official art' than 'of our own' (Ruus 2000, p. 11) (for the history of the Estonian film scholarship see Närepea 2011, pp. 9-13).

⁴ These include *Via Transversa: Lost Cinema of the Former Eastern Bloc* (eds Närepea & Trossek 2008), *Special Issue 10: Estonian Cinema, KinoKultura* (eds Närepea, Mazierska & Laaniste 2010), *Baltic Cinemas: After the 90s: Shifting (Hi)Stories and (Id)Entites* (ed. Šukaitytė 2010), *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* (eds Cunningham, Mazierska & Goddard since 2010), *Estonian Cinescapes: Spaces, Places and Sites in Soviet Estonian Cinema (and Beyond)*(Närepea 2011), *Akadeemia (Eesti Film: 1912-2012)* (2012) and *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas* (Imre 2012).

small nations⁵, each in their own way introducing new thinking on Estonia's filmic trajectories. While the majority of recent studies devoted to Estonian cinema have tended to focus on the earlier periods, illuminating previously opaque aspects of filmmaking under the official ideological censorship and aesthetic ideals imposed by Soviet authorities, there have been fewer attempts in the exploration of post-Soviet Estonian cinema, an area that the present work seeks to investigate.

This dissertation is concerned with the cinematic representations of urban and rural spaces in contemporary Estonian cinema in relation to national identity discourse. It identifies a distinctive '*motif of the road*' in a corpus of Estonian films of the late 1990s and 2000s characterised by the portrayal of the journey undertaken by city-dweller protagonist(s) between urban and rural spaces, and investigates the ways these personal spatial traverses are interwoven with the national trajectory of post-Soviet transition through which contemporary Estonian filmmakers articulate their critique on Estonia's search for new identity and the process of Westernisation, in particular the paradoxical effects of pursuing a modern free-market economy. Through an analysis of the spatial modelling within the films in light of Yuri Lotman's cultural semiotics, particularly his 'notion of boundary' and the aspect of its crossing, it is argued that these films capture the '*border-spaces*', the peripheral areas of tension and dialogue between internal space (urban) and external space (rural), and that the filmmakers' manipulation of space coupled with the use of the road motif engages in the wider reassessment and reinterpretation of the contested relationship between landscape and Estonian national identity that has emerged in the Estonian society after regaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. This dissertation is also an attempt to explore the potential of Lotmanian semiotics of culture as a method for film analysis, more specifically the usefulness of his conceptualisation of boundary in our reading of cinematic landscape. By contextualising contemporary representations of cinematic urban and rural spaces

⁵ On the latter tendency, according to Renata Šukaitytė, Estonian cinema together with the other two Baltic cinemas of Lithuania and Latvia serve as a 'contextual element in the analysis of post-Soviet or Central European cinemas' (Šukaitytė 2010, p. 7). Another manifestation pointed out by Ewa Mazierska is the association of Estonian cinema with other cinemas of small nations, a trend stemming from the 'postmodern interest in marginality, small narratives, local cultures' (Mazierska 2010a, p. 8).

under discussion within Soviet-/ Estonian film history, it seeks to investigate the relationship between aesthetic continuity and innovation.

This dissertation focuses its discussion on the analysis of five Estonian full-length feature films emerging in the late 1990s and 2000s, namely, Arko Okk's *The Highway Crossing* (*Ristumine peateega*, 1999), Rando Pettai's *Made in Estonia* (*Vanad ja kobedad saavad jalad alla*, 2003), Elmo Nüganen's *Mindless* (*Meeletu*, 2006), Andres Maimik and Rain Tolk's *186 Kilometers* (*Jan Uuspõld läheb Tartusse*, 2007) and Veiko Õunpuu's *The Temptation of St. Tony* (*Püha Tõnu kiusamine*, 2009). Directed by various Estonian filmmakers, at first glance these films are of disparate styles and genres (comedy, drama and satirical tragedy), ranging from domestic box office hits to art house picks. However, these films do share in common some salient features: *thematically*, they narrate the journeys undertaken by the protagonist(s) between urban and rural spaces⁶; in terms of *setting*, these narratives are set in either clearly identified or identifiable contemporary Estonia, in which rural surroundings are visually and narratively foregrounded; in terms of *choice of cinematic character(s)*, all of the main protagonists are Estonian city-dwellers (the majority of whom are explicitly stated as coming from the capital Tallinn), who are in one way or another marginal characters of the city in the middle of personal crises such as career setback, relationship problem or loss of meaning and direction in life, and are in search of hopes, changes and opportunities through the journey, either by choice or by circumstance; and, *structurally*, they explore the tension between 'urban/city/centre' and 'rural/countryside/periphery' through the characters (protagonist(s) and inhabitants of both spaces), the juxtaposition of artificial and natural elements (e.g. environments, objects, sounds, etc.), the use of cinematic devices and symbols.

⁶ The road motif has a rather prominent presence, given that the cinematic output of post-Soviet Estonian cinema is small in size - between 1991-2000, 25 films were released, between 2001-2010 50 films (See *Estonian Film 1991-1999* 2001; *Estonian Film 2000-2006* 2008; Estonian Film Institute 2011). One latest example sharing this road motif is Toomas Hussar's *Mushrooming* (*Seenelkäik*, 2012), which is not included in the present discussion. Variants of the road motif are also discerned in other post-Soviet Estonian films, which either depict the journeys undertaken by Estonian protagonists abroad, e.g. Arvo Iho's *Heart of the Bear* (*Karu süda*, 2001), or by foreign-origin protagonists en route to Estonia, e.g. Peeter Simm's *Good Hands* (*Head käed*, 2001) and *Schnauze Voll/Fed up!* (*Kõrini!*, 2005).

This selection has a specific temporal focus. Not only are the Estonian films in question released in a relatively recent post-Soviet period, these narratives are also characterised by a preoccupation with the present situation (as well as near past) in Estonia and its future prospect, which are distinguished from a trope of post-Soviet Estonian films seeking to come to terms with the country's traumatic past and previously suppressed memories of the two world wars, the inter-war period and the Soviet era.⁷ This focus, as to be shown in the later analysis, revealed a discernible concern on the Estonia's immediate realities, encompassing the heated topics of the profound impacts of the socio-economic transformation on the society at large and the rural region in particular, and Estonia's EU and NATO membership in the recent years. By addressing and emphasising the conflictual relationship between the urban and the rural, these films polemicize with the image of Estonia as one of the most successful reformers of the post-Soviet transition in the region (Norkus, cited in Vetik 2012; See also Bennich-Björkman & Likić-Brborić 2012) which has gained dominance in scholarly discussions as well as the official rhetoric of the newly independent state. These films reflect a shared sense of ambivalence towards Estonia's pursuit of the neo-liberal model of modernisation and the embrace of Western values, thus participating in the negotiation of Estonian national identity, a subject that has been continually brought to the fore in the post-Soviet context.

This dissertation is in four chapters. **Chapter I** offers an overview of the existing body of literature related to the present topic. It begins with the concept of 'cinematic landscape', the link between landscape and national identity, and the nexus between urban and rural spaces in filmic representation. It then turns to the specific Estonian context, considering the relationship between urban-rural spaces and national identity discourse, particularly the perception of the rural as a site of 'homeland', in larger historical perspective, folkloric traditions as well as previous studies on the spatial representations of Soviet-/ Estonian cinema. On the basis of the latter of these, it

⁷ For example, Hardi Volmer's *All My Lenins (Minu Leninid, 1997)*, Sulev Keedus's *Georgica (Georgica, 1998)* and *Somnambulance (Somnambuul, 2003)*, Elmo Nüganen's *Names in Marble (Nimed marmortahvilil, 2002)*, Rene Reinumägi & Jaak Kilmi's *Revolution of Pigs (Sigade revolutsioon, 2004)* and Antti Jokinen's *Purge (Puhastus, 2012)*.

identifies potential areas of contribution: first, as a continued effort in mapping the ‘spatial void’ of the Estonian cinematic representations of a relatively recent post-Soviet period; second, as a case study examining the cinematic landscape from the perspective of Lotmanian semiotics. **Chapter II** outlines the analytical framework and methodological approach of this research. It introduces Yuri Lotman’s cultural semiotics, beginning with the ideas of ‘text’ and ‘semiosphere’, which will be followed by a detailed discussion of the ‘notion of boundary’ and the crossing of boundary. It concludes with an illustration of how Lotmanian concepts are to be applied and adapted for the film analysis in this dissertation, in which the analytical structure will be sketched out. **Chapters III** analyses the five individual film texts in light of Lotmanian semiotic approach and the specifics of the Estonian context in three parts: (1) ‘The Road of Zero’ (an analysis of *The Highway Crossing*); (2) ‘The Road from Zero’ (an analysis of *Made in Estonia* and *186 Kilometers*); and, (3) ‘The Road to Zero’ (an analysis of *Mindless* and *The Temptation of St. Tony*). The themes are assigned to underscore the subtle differences in the choice of the protagonists in these films and the variety of aspects of the urban-rural dynamics explored by the filmmakers in relation to the (re)construction of ‘Estonianness’ through these protagonists’ crossings: ‘The Road of Zero’ discusses the accidental journey of the protagonists which begins and ends at the same point, representing a circle [‘0’]; it is a *journey of chance* without a pre-set goal or a consequence; ‘The Road from Zero’ looks at the journey of the city’s ‘loser’, in which the protagonists of the two films set off to the rural by circumstances, a desperate act from scratch [‘0’]; it is a *journey of self-discovery*; and finally, ‘The Road to Zero’ turns to the journey of the city’s ‘winner’, in which the protagonists of the two films embark for the rural by personal choices, who intend to abandon what they have [‘0’] in search of higher moral values ; it is a *journey of spirituality*. **Chapter IV** revisits the relationship between cinematic landscape and national identity in the Estonian context from a wider perspective. The first part is a synchronic analysis on the contemporary cinematic representations of urban and rural spaces in Estonian cinema as manifested in five closely examined films of the late 1990s and 2000s, identifying the similarities and differences among these films in the ways of seeing the landscape through the motif of

the road. The second part adopts a diachronic approach, examining the continuities and changes between contemporary and past representations of urban and rural spaces in Estonian films; the former is based on the findings of the five analysed films discussed in Chapter III, while the latter is drawn partly on Eva Näripea's previous studies on the spatial representations of Soviet Estonian cinema of the 1960s and partly on my own reading of two films of a later period, namely, Sulev Nõmmik's *Here We Are!* (*Siin me oleme!*, 1979) and Peeter Simm's *The Ideal Landscape* (*Ideaalmaastik*, 1980). This comparison seeks to reveal how the theme of urban and rural spaces has been persistently reworked and reconfigured in Estonian cinema within the national identity discourse.

CHAPTER I - LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 What is Cinematic Landscape

The upsurge of interest in the exploration of cinematic landscape is evident in the presence of a richly diverse body of literature informed by a multitude of theoretical and analytical frameworks. Much of the current investigations inquire into the ostensibly natural appearance of landscape in film. Its depiction is no longer seen as carrying the function of being a mere backdrop against which the narratives and actions of the characters unfold. Rather, it is argued that its essence lies in its excess of serving as a means of plot and character development.

Martin Lefebvre, in the introduction to his edited volume entitled *Landscape and Film* (2006), has traced the origin of the word 'landscape' in the English lexicon back to the seventeenth century, elucidating the shared meaning of 'giv[ing] form or shape' embedded in different variants of the word (Lefebvre 2006a, p. xv), which indicates a sense of moulding and becoming, along with an element of human creation. Drawing on the emergence of landscape painting in Europe, Lefebvre argues that filmic landscape comes into existence when the screened space is freed from the subordination to narrative and becomes an object in its own right by invoking 'an "autonomising" gaze', which is mostly transient and fleeting. He perceives filmic space as alternating between the modes of 'setting' and 'landscape', and describes the latter as 'a doubly temporalised landscape', which is:

subjected simultaneously to the temporality of the cinematographic medium and to that of the spectator's gaze, which is given to shifting from the narrative to the spectacular mode and back again from one moment the next. This doubled temporal existence results in the precariousness of a landscape that more or less vanishes when the

narrative mode takes over and the cinematic space resumes its narrative function as setting. (Lefebvre 2006b, p. 29)

According to Lefebvre, the possibility of this ‘autonomising gaze’ giving rise to the cinematic landscape rests on two conditions: first, the intention of the film director to present a landscape; second, the spectators’ gaze informed by ‘their cultural knowledge and their sensibility’ (Lefebvre 2006b, pp. 30-31; p. 51).

The crucial link between filmic landscape and spectator’s cultural repertoire recalls an insightful essay by Paul Willemen (1984), in which he proposes, following Brecht and Raymond Williams, a ‘complex seeing’ in film analysis, an approach derived from his observation of a new tendency in the strategy deployed by filmmakers in the avant-garde films in the 1980s. He considers landscape in film as ‘an active, multi-layered discursive space to be read in its own right’ (ibid., p. 69). He writes of the double strategy in the use of filmic space, as exemplified in the avant-garde films:

As a rule, the avant garde narrative will oscillate between the use of setting and the activation of setting as an autonomous discourse. [...] The activation of a setting such as a landscape may require the mobilisation of cultural knowledges: e.g. a farmer’s knowledge of the land or a shared cultural knowledge of the historical meanings that have accrued to particular sites [...], allowing for the reading of a discourse on history within the use of landscape itself, allowing narrative events to reverberate and to interact with or against an accompanying reading of history. (ibid., p. 70)

In both accounts, it is argued that the distinction between ‘landscape’ (or as Willemen puts it, an ‘activated’ setting) and ‘setting’ in film is attributed by the strategic use of filmic space of the filmmaker and a particular ‘gaze’ of the spectator, which is built upon his/her cultural knowledge in recognising, decoding and engaging with the

meanings that might otherwise go unnoticed. Filmic landscape is thus conceptualised in terms of the exchange between filmmaker and spectator, between production and reception, giving primacy to the very ‘context’ where the dynamic and ongoing process of constructing and interpreting the cinematic representation of landscape take place.

1.2 Landscape and National Identity

This dissertation investigates a specific kind of cinematic landscape, i.e. the urban and the rural, and its pertinence to the subject of national identity. It is essential to understand the relationship between landscape (both physical and cinematic) and national identity. In his historical account of landscape tradition - *Landscape and Memory* (1995), Simon Schama argues that the realms of landscape and national identity are closely intertwined, even though we tend to think of landscape as being free of the manipulation of human beings, the perception of landscape is inevitably a product of our culture (Schama 1995). Landscape, as he describes, is ‘the work of the mind’, which is constructed ‘as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock’ (ibid., p. 7). Richly laden with metaphor, myth, allegory and memory, it is argued that landscape can invoke, express and deepen political or social sentiment of a collective group. He contends that, national identity ‘would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated, and enriched as a homeland’ (ibid., p. 15). In other words, the representations of landscape offer ‘national identity a materiality it would otherwise lack’ (Agnew 1998, p. 216).

The relationship between cinematic landscape and national identity poses an even more complex question, as it is entangled with the long-standing debates concerning the contentious link between ‘cinema’ and ‘nation’. Broadly speaking, there are two major aspects to the (re)conceptualisation of ‘national cinema’ at hand. First, cinema, understood as both ‘an industry’ and ‘a cluster of cultural strategies’ (Vitali & Willemsen 2006, p. 2), is by default subject to the influence of diverse non-national and transnational forces in the form of capital, distribution, policies, personnel, technology,

cultures, especially so in the face of globalisation. Second, ‘national identity’ is an elusive concept in itself, which, according to Stuart Hall, is ‘increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions’ after the critique from the deconstructive methods in recent times (Hall 1996, p. 4).

However, as scholars have pointed out, the concept of ‘national identity’ still bears pertinence to today’s film scholarship, albeit now in forms different from its previous ones (Hjort & MacKenzie 2000; Vitali & Willemen 2006). Instead of perceiving ‘film’ as a manifestation of an integral or a coherent identity of a given ‘nation’, Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen have poignantly argued that it is more productive to think of films in terms of ‘discursive terrains for struggle between dominant and non-dominant forces over the power to fix the meaning of the given narrative stock’ (Vitali & Willemen 2006, p. 8). As such, cinema serves what they call a ‘stage’ where ‘the historical conditions that constitute “the national”’ can be played out and observed (ibid.).

Therefore, cinematic landscape is one of the entrances that allows a glimpse at the process of which various attempts involved in defining and mediating ‘the given narrative stock’. Recent scholarly volumes on the analysis of cinematic landscape⁸ have reflected a tendency among the contributors to examine filmic landscape within national framework, involved with questions of national identity within the specific context, demonstrating that, despite the roots in the past and shared memory, representations of cinematic landscape are by no means fixed nor settled. It is within the historical specificity of cinematic landscape - as spatially and temporally created - that we find its link with the dynamics of the construction and negotiation of national identity.

⁸ In addition to aforementioned *Landscape and Film* (ed. Lefebvre 2006), other examples include *Spaces in European Cinema* (ed. Konatantarakos 2000), *Revisiting Space: Space and Place in European Cinema* (eds Everett & Goodbody 2005), *Representing the Rural: Space, Place and Identity in Films About the Land* (eds Fowler & Helfield 2006) and *Cinema and Landscape* (eds Harper & Rayner 2010).

1.3 Representing Urban and Rural Spaces in Film

In the films under discussion, the central organising theme is that of the road motif between 'urban' and 'rural' spaces. Scholarly interest in cinematic spatiality starts with the urban, cityscape and metropolitan milieu - spheres that are closer to the cinema born out of modernity and technological progress. Early researchers are interested in the close link between 'filmic space' and 'real space (cityscape)', the ways in which film interacts with the lived, socio-political space, as a constituent of modern and postmodern development in the 'extra-cinematic city' (ed. Clarke 1997). Subsequent extension of scholars' interest from the representations of the urban to the rural has shifted the focus to the investigation of the relationship among 'intra-cinematic spaces'.

The urban and rural filmic spaces are widely considered as sites of contestation that is highly pertinent to the interrogation of modernisation, social changes, and national identity; each is embroiled in a particular way of life, values, and aspects of national history. Traditionally, urban milieu is identified with progress, development, future opportunities, whereas rural milieu is seen in terms of convention, tradition and backward-looking outlook, therefore, the former is often viewed as the 'preferred national space' (Fowler & Helfield 2006, p. 3). However the urban/city-rural/countryside dichotomy that characterises much of the early studies has been subsequently replaced with a more complex reading (eds Everett & Goodbody 2005; eds Fowler & Helfield 2006). As Catherine Fowler and Gillian Helfield point out, urban and rural spaces are recently posited as 'points of tension' than 'points of contrast' (Fowler & Helfield 2006, p. 3), allowing film scholars to analyse the two realms as two universes in parallel (ibid., p. 13):

It is significant that the urban and the rural are never portrayed as either completely positive or negative, nor is either always considered a preferred national space. Each has its own cycles and conflicts to contend with within these cycles, between the promise of progress and development and the reality of degeneration. (ibid., pp. 2-3)

It is also pinpointed that the motif of road has a particularly prominent presence in films featuring landscape. The road between urban and rural spaces, as they see it, is a ‘cyclical form’ of journey:

Here the journey is essentially one of (re)discovery: a means of travelling back to the strong time of cultural and national origins, the source of a collective heritage, while at the same time travelling forward, to social, cultural, and national self-realization. (ibid., p. 13)

In this sense, the road between the urban and the rural is far from being a one-way, linear and straight-forward trip. The road pictured on the screen maps a discursive traverse across space and time of a collective kind.

1.4 The Theme of Urban and Rural Spaces in Estonian Context

Returning to our focus on Estonia, the significance and symbolism accorded to the theme of urban and rural spaces could be traced within the wider semantic context of Estonia, within history, folkloric and cinematic traditions.

In his article of ‘Place, Territory, and National Estonia’ (1999), Tim Unwin has demonstrated that the close tie between land and the construction of Estonian national identity has its origins in Estonia’s national awakening in the nineteenth century and has since then sustained its significance in the national discourse even in the present-day political rhetoric in post-Soviet Estonia (Unwin 1999). He points out that Estonian identity is traditionally characterised by a particular relationship with the rural. This association can be charted against the country’s crucial historical moments. For instance, Estonia’s national awakening movement emerging from the 1860s, after centuries of German, Danish, Swedish and Russian rule, was notable for a strong

identification with the Estonian countryside and the rural peasant way of life. Such a link was reinforced during the inter-war years, when the country witnessed the emergence of a large number of privately-owned and small-scale farms through the land reform. The rural identity was later intertwined with Estonia's national resistance and independence following the Soviet occupation, particularly evident in the nationalist movement of the 1980s that gave a centrality to the protection of Estonian land and environment against the Soviet unrestrained exploitation of Estonia's natural resources (ibid.; Unwin 1997). According to Unwin, the relationship towards land, or more accurately, the divergent interpretations towards it, continues to be a subject of contentious political debates concerning Estonia's new identity in the post-Soviet period. At the core of the public discussion is the tensions between the continuation of 'a particular kind of rural identity' and the creation of a new identity that is 'modern, forward looking, and based essentially on the success of its urban commercial economy' (ibid., pp. 151-2).

Within folkloric traditions, according to Kadri Tüür, Estonians are traditionally known as 'forest people', an idea derived from the link of Estonian folklore with the Finno-Ugric or boreal cultural heritage that signify a harmonious relationship with the nature (Tüür 2002, p. 488). In addition, a subtly different idea towards the forest has emerged in the recent decades that perceives it as 'a safe place' and 'a refugee for those seeking freedom' (ibid.). This association stems from the guerrilla resistances of Estonian 'forest brothers' against foreign invasions in the forests occurred in WWII and post-war era (ibid.). As Tiina Peil and Helen Sooväli put it, 'rurality and the narrative of land [...] maintain a central role in Estonia's imagination of its homeland' (Peil & Sooväli, cited in Näripea 2011, p. 69).

In cinema, as revealed by recently emerging studies devoted to the investigation of Estonian films from the spatial perspective⁹, the theme of urban and rural spaces bears an intimate tie with the creation and maintenance of Estonian national identity. Of particular relevance to the present discussion is Eva Närepea's critical works on the Estonian filmic landscape, which will be outlined in detail for the contextualisation of the attempts of contemporary filmmakers under discussion. Chapter IV will return to the early spatial representations in Soviet Estonian cinema, specifically of the 1960s, for a comparison with the post-Soviet ones.

In her study titled *Estonian Cinescapes: Spaces, Places and Sites in Soviet Estonian Cinema (and Beyond)* (2011), Närepea analyses the spatial representations of Estonian cinema at different stages, spanning from the 1940s to the early 1990s, showing that filmic landscape has been a site of contestation during both the Soviet period and the first years of post-Soviet period. She situates Estonian cinema in the intersection of 'national (local) and inter- or transnational (Soviet and Western)' forces, revealing the ongoing and intricate process in which 'national identity' is in a 'constant state of change and negotiation' (Närepea 2011, p. 20). Närepea discerns in the works of the first and young generation of Moscow-educated native Estonian filmmakers in the 1960s an emergence of a new narrative and spatial representation that clearly deviates from the one propagated by the guest filmmakers of the 1950s, who came to Estonia by the directives of the Soviet central authorities (ibid., p. 12).¹⁰ On this basis, a distinction between 'nation-scape' and 'Soviet-scape' is introduced to capture the 'two modes of spatial (as well as cultural and historical) sensibility' and to elucidate the intentional attempts on the part of native Estonian filmmakers in instilling "national" elements' in

⁹ According to Mark Shiel, the proliferation of spatial studies has its origin in the 'spatial turn' in the 1970s, when scholars increasingly turn to space as an analytical framework in the studies of modern and postmodern social and cultural phenomena (Shiel, cited in Närepea 2011, p. 14) Within the post-Soviet context, as several scholars have noted that spatial perspective figures prominently in contemporary critical discourse on the cinemas of the Eastern European region (Mazierska 2010a; Imre 2012). Ewa Mazierska observes that one of the emerging analytical trends in the post-1989 Eastern European cinemas, is a move 'from the domination of history towards exploration of space', which casts the light to 'socialist cities, estates, building, etc., as well as geographic regions' (Mazierska 2010a, p. 12).

¹⁰ Eva Närepea notes that the 1960s witnessed the birth of the 'national school' in Estonian cinema, which was mainly established and constituted by the first generation of native Estonian filmmakers graduated from the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow (Närepea 2011, p. 12).

their cinematic works (ibid., pp. 12-13). She defines the distinction between ‘nation-scape’ and ‘Soviet-scape’ as follows:

‘During the 1960s, rural settings prevailed over urban environments, and the portrayals of the countryside were based on the models of Italian neorealism, replacing the exoticized representations of the nation and the national of the Stalinist period. At the same time, these filmic landscapes often reveal a relative indifference towards contemporary realities and are thus coloured by a certain inclination towards nostalgic escapism.’ (ibid., p. 27)

In addition, the works of young Estonian filmmakers are also noted with a ‘subtly shifting emphasis from centre to peripheries, evoking borders and even the world beyond them, drawing attention to transitions and in-between spaces, margins and liminal spheres’ (ibid., p. 95), reflecting an ideological orientation towards ‘national’ territory. Although Chapter IV will delve further into the comparison between past and contemporary spatial representations in Estonian cinema, suffice to say here that the works of contemporary Estonian filmmakers share with the works of these precursors a noticeably similarity in the strategic deployment of national landscape and an interest in the rural spaces.

Clearly, the theme of urban and rural spaces featuring in the contemporary Estonian films under discussion is a manifestation of a tradition that has traces in broader historical, folkloristic and cinematic contexts of Estonia. The theme is not only ascribed with significant values but also closely related to the (re)discovery of Estonian national identity, especially the rural is widely perceived as the site of ‘homeland’ frequently evoking the country’s true identity, cultural heritage and national resistance against foreign suppression. However, if the rural space was considered as the preferred ‘national space’ to the urban space in the eyes of the native Estonian filmmakers during the Soviet period, the correlation between the two milieus is inevitably subject to a new

light following the independence in 1991, as both urban and rural spaces now belong to the ‘national’ territory of the post-Soviet Estonia. The rapid developments in the two last decades have turned the urban space (the capital, Tallinn, being the heart of the orbit of changes) the *bona fide* ‘centre’ of independent Estonia, a new reality that finds its expression in the screened world. In the later analysis of the five contemporary Estonian films, it will be demonstrated that the sharp antithesis between urban and rural spaces (coupled with the tendency of preferring the latter to the former as the ‘national space’) has been substituted by a more complex form of dynamism.

On the basis of previous studies on Estonian cinematic landscape, this research seeks to contribute to this field in two ways: (i) to fill the ‘spatial void’ of the cinematic representations of landscape in the later years of post-Soviet Estonian cinema, i.e. the late 1990s and 2000s; (ii) to serve as a case study of cinematic landscape from the perspective of Lotmanian cultural semiotics, demonstrating the usefulness of his model in relation to the exploration of spatial representation in film.

CHAPTER II - ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This dissertation incorporates Yuri Lotman's semiotic approach in the analysis of film. This chapter will discuss the relevance of Lotman's semiotics as an analytical framework and a method to the analysis of these films in question, first by looking at the fundamental concepts of 'text' and 'semiosphere' and then by drawing particular attention to his 'notion of boundary'. It will conclude with a view on the structure of the textual analysis of the five contemporary Estonian films (Chapter III), which is primarily drawn on and adapted from Lotman's semiotic methods in his analyses of spatial modelling in literary texts.

2.1 A Semiotic Approach: Yuri Lotman's 'Text' and 'Semiosphere'

For Lotman, cultural and linguistic concepts of 'text' are not identical. In the study of culture, 'text' is defined not only in terms of its inherent structure of signs, as 'a concrete object having its *own internal features* which cannot be deduced from anything else apart from itself', but also in terms of its relationship to its functions within a given culture, as such culture can be seen as 'a totality of texts' or 'a totality of functions [of the text]' (Lotman 1978, p. 233). In his *Semiotics of Cinema* (1976), Lotman details the specific sign system, structure and language owned by cinema, and explores the ties between cinema and the 'extra-textual structures' that '[a] film is part of the ideological struggles, culture and art of its era [...] it is related to numerous aspects of life lying outside the text of the film' (Lotman 1976, p. 42). From this standpoint, film can be understood as 'an artistic text' by itself, and as 'a text of culture' in a given system, with the latter subject to the analytical treatment of researchers.

The relationship between 'text' and 'extra-text structures' acquires a more nuanced and fluid expression in the form of 'semiosphere', a concept developed in the last decade of Lotman's career in analogy to V. I. Vernadsky's concept of 'biosphere'.

Lotman defines ‘semiosphere’ as a ‘semiotic space, outside of which semiosis itself cannot exist’ (Lotman (2005 [1984]), p. 208), and without which languages can neither exist nor function (ibid, pp. 218-9), and a multi-level system that each semiosphere is ‘simultaneously both participant in the dialogue (as part of the semiosphere) and the space of dialogue (the semiosphere as a whole)’ (ibid., p. 225).

The shift towards the concept of ‘semiosphere’ is profound. Umberto Eco, in his introduction to Lotman’s *Universe of the Mind* (2001 [1990]), remarks on extension of Lotman’s interest from the earlier concept of the ‘text as a unity’ to the latter concept of culture as a ‘whole semiosphere’, to be conceived a ‘single mechanism’ (ibid., p. xii). The fully developed notion of semiosphere in many regards refines the link between ‘text’ and ‘extra-text structures’. The idea of seeing ‘text’ being immersed in the semiosphere permits us to see individual texts not in isolation but in interaction; not in singularity but in plurality; not as static and independent entities but as circulating and mutually dependent interlocutors (ibid., pp. 218-9). As Peeter Torop has pointed out, the notion of semiosphere brings to ‘semiotics of culture a new understanding of holism, a holistic analysis of dynamic processes’ (Lotman 2009, p. xxxv). In this way, cinema can be understood as ‘a communicative system’ that needs to be immersed in the semiosphere and comes into constant and continuous contact with other semiospheres at all levels.

The complexity and dialogism of the Lotmanian ‘semiosphere’ is perfectly captured by his apt analogy to the image of a museum hall, which is worthy of a reproduction here:

‘As an example of a single world looked at synchronically, imagine a museum hall where exhibits from different periods are on display, along with inscriptions in known and unknown languages, and instructions for decoding them; besides there are the explanations composed by the museum staff, plans for tours and rules for the

behaviour of the visitors. Imagine also in this hall tour-leaders and the visitors and imagine all this as a single mechanism (which *in a certain sense* it is). This is an image of the semiosphere. (Lotman 2001 [1990], pp. 126-127; original emphasis)

We will soon recognise a degree of affinity between the imaginary wandering within a museum hall and our following of the crossings of protagonists in films. We are, as if, offered a restricted view of the museum hall through the screened landscape: some films take us to one exhibition room, others bring us through a corridor of various connecting rooms. We might find in these films different designs of the visiting route between urban and rural spaces, but all the same, we are able to see a myriad of elements of diverse spatial and temporal origins in juxtaposition and interaction with one another.

2.2 Yuri Lotman's 'Notion of Boundary' and the Crossing

The 'notion of boundary' is fundamental for the understanding of the internal structure of Lotmanian semiosphere. According to Lotman, the semiosphere is guided by the dual laws of 'binarism' and 'asymmetry' (Lotman 2001 [1990], p. 124). The former is a mechanism of division and subdivision based on the principle of binary opposition, resulting in the creation and multiplication of languages, while the latter presupposes the need of translation between asymmetrical languages, especially between 'centre' and 'periphery' of the semiosphere (ibid., pp. 123-130). Based on these principles, we have before us, what Lotman describes, a semiosphere which is '[c]omposed as it is of conflicting structures, it none the less is also marked by individuation' (ibid., p. 131). Boundary is therefore understood both as 'one of the primary mechanisms of semiotic individuation' (the 'outer limit of a first-person form') (ibid.) and a continuous process of 'semiotic dynamism' (ibid., p. 134). Its features are paradoxical. As Lotman states,

‘The notion of boundary is defined as ‘an ambivalent one: *it both separates and unites*. It is always the boundary of something and so belongs to both frontier cultures, to both contiguous semiospheres. The boundary is bilingual and polylingual. The boundary is a mechanism for translating texts of an alien semiotics into “our” language, it is the place where what is “external” is transformed into what is “internal”, it is a filtering membrane which so transforms foreign texts that they become part of the semiosphere’s internal semiotics while still retaining their own characteristics.’ (Lotman 2001 [1990], pp. 136-7; emphasis added)

Clearly, this conceptualisation of boundary concerns both the *opposition* and *interaction* of spaces. Thus, the relationship between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ spaces is best understood in a befitting description by Daniele Monticelli that, ‘a so/as or neither/nor logic substitutes itself here for the exclusive either/or logic of binary oppositions’ (Monticelli 2009, p. 336). On this basis, boundary takes on an extended life: it goes beyond a mere ‘*separation*’ of binary oppositions, following all the way the incessant activities in their relationship in the form of ‘*filtering*’ and ‘*translation*’.

The central ‘motif of the road’ in the films to be analysed is manifested in the crossing of the spaces (urban/rural) of the protagonists. The spatial movements of the protagonists place an apparent stress on the dialogic relationships between spaces, their correspondence, rather than framing the spaces in terms of static binary oppositions. I seek to argue that the spaces captured in these films are that of ‘border-spaces’, the peripheral areas bordering on the dividing line between ‘my/our’ space and ‘their space’ (Lotman 2001 [1990], p. 131). They are regarded by Lotman as ‘zone[s] of structural neutrality’, which ‘constitute a “reserve of indeterminacy”’ (Lotman, cited in Monticelli 2009, pp. 336-7), for they are in the state of ‘becoming’ - into something that is yet to be known. In these films, ‘urban space’ stands for the ‘centre’ and ‘internal space’ where the protagonists are originally from and dwell in, while ‘rural space’ is

equivalent to the ‘periphery’ and ‘external space’ where the protagonists are exposed to the unfamiliar and the unpredictable. The ‘border-spaces’ are animated by the protagonists’ shifting presences.

In a sense, these protagonists of the road bear resemblance to Dante and Ulysses in Lotman’s analysis of *Divine Comedy*, as being the mobile characters who ‘are voluntary or forced exiles, driven by passion, crossing the boundaries which separate one area of the cosmos from another’ (Lotman 2001 [1990], p. 183). The crossings portrayed in the films might not be that of forbidden land, but the deviation from the normal course into alien spaces has accorded to these journeys symbolic meanings. These journeys offer the audience a glimpse into the ways urban and rural spaces come into contact with each another, and through the filmic portrayals of which the critique of filmmakers on Estonia’s path of modernisation and search of national identity emerge: the moment when the meaning-seeking journeys of individuals transform into a wider national trajectory.

2.3 Methodological Approach

This dissertation is an attempt to explore the usefulness of Yuri Lotman’s semiotic approach and its application as a method to the textual analysis of film. In the view of Lotman, semiotics is ‘a method of humanities’ yet the extent of its application has a multi-disciplinary dimension. He argues succinctly that, semiotics ‘is defined not by the nature of its object but by *the means of analysing it*’ (Lotman 2001 [1990], p. 4; emphasis added). In this view, at the will of the given researcher, any object has the potential of being semiotised. Lotman’s own oeuvre of over 550 texts has demonstrated an immense diversity in the choice of study objects, encompassing the analyses of literary texts, cultural and intellectual history, symbolism of St. Petersburg, cinema, aesthetics, and even touching upon mathematics and biology (ibid. p. vii; Schönle & Shine 2006, pp. 3-4;).

Of particular pertinence to the current discussion of the road motif is Lotman's study of the semiotic spaces in literary texts, especially the spatial modelling in Russian medieval texts, Dante's *Divine Comedy* (through the journey of Dante and Ulysses) and Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (centred on the representations of 'home' and 'anti-home'). In his reading of these texts, he demonstrates how 'non-spatial' ideas are expressed through the depiction of 'spatial movements of the characters' or 'real space' in the texts; he also elaborates on the intricate link between the spatial modelling of the texts and that of the world we live in, 'a two-way connection' in his words: not only does the former carry a mirror image of the latter, but it has in turn shaped the latter in its image (ibid., p. 150; p. 191; p. 203). According to Lotman, '[o]ur understanding of geographical space is one of the ways the human mind models space. Geography came into being in particular historical circumstances and took on different forms according to the nature of the general models of the world, of which it was a part' (Lotman 2001[1990], p. 171). We can find in the text its interaction with the wider spatial modelling.

These two major aspects, in essence, form the skeleton of textual analysis of this dissertation. Beginning with a look at the spatial models within each selected film text in light of Lotmanian 'semiosphere' and 'notion of boundary', I will examine the ways filmic urban and rural spaces are constructed as binary oppositions engaging in constant dialogue and translation, and explore how and what kinds of 'non-spatial' meanings are expressed and articulated when situated within the national identity discourse of contemporary Estonia. I will then turn to the 'two-way connection' raised by Lotman, which casts light on the engagement between semiotic spaces in these film texts and the world of real space lying outside of the texts, with each taking part in a continuous process of (re)construction and (re)modelling of the other. Such an interaction will be reflected in a *synchronic* comparison of the spatial representations of urban and rural spaces of film texts of a certain period (i.e. five selected Estonian films of the late 1990s and the 2000s), and in a *diachronic* comparison of the representations between different

periods (i.e. contemporary and earlier periods of Estonian cinema). Chapter III perceives each film text as the ‘semiosphere as a whole’, while Chapter IV considers each film text as ‘part of the semiosphere’, shedding light on the dialogue between the film texts and other parts (sub-structures) of the same semiosphere.

In the following chapter, the textual analysis of the films is in three parts: (1) ‘The Road of Zero’ (an analysis of *The Highway Crossing*); (2) ‘The Road from Zero’ (an analysis of *Made in Estonia* and *186 Kilometers*); and, (3) ‘The Road to Zero’ (an analysis of *Mindless* and *The Temptation of St. Tony*). As mentioned in the Introduction, the designation of this thematic order aims to highlight the ways these protagonists’ crossings encompassing similar spaces can be developed into different types, through which the filmmakers in question address various aspects of the post-Soviet Estonian identity and the effects of Estonia’s transitional path.

‘The Road of Zero’ discusses the *journey of chance* of the ‘indifferent’; ‘The Road from Zero’ examines the *journey of self-discovery* of the ‘loser’; and, ‘The Road to Zero’ explores the *journey of spirituality* of the ‘winner’.

CHAPTER III - TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: SEMIOTIC SPACES IN FIVE FILMS

3.1 The Road of Zero: *The Highway Crossing* (1999)

Adapted from the play of the Estonian playwright Jaan Tätte's of the same title (alternatively, *The Tale of a Golden Fish*), *The Highway Crossing*, as the title hints at, begins with a highway. The film opens with the silhouettes of two hitchhiking lovers, Laura (Piret Kalda) and Roland (Jaan Tätte) on the highway, which functions here as the 'outer limit' between significant 'space' and insignificant 'non-space'. The jazz tune in the background suggests the city origins of the protagonists, who soon get into a car. Following the voyeuristic gaze of a nameless driver (Emil Urbel) at the rearview, the couple in love is kissing in the back seat. The next scene shows the couples, whom are dropped off at a crossroads out of the blue, seeking shelter from heavy rain in the log cabin of Osvald (Andrus Vaarik) amidst countryside. Forbidding surrounding, broken windows, disarrayed furniture, swearing from the eerie host are instant indicators to the couple that it is anything but home, signifying a shift from the centre to the periphery.

At first, everything in this wooden house seems incomprehensible by the logic of their world: Osvald, the host, welcomes Laura to stay overnight, but shuts her boyfriend Roland out of the door; Osvald and Laura have never met before, but he claims he fell in love with her a month ago, when he caught sight of her photo in a magazine of which she is unaware. The division of spaces persists, until Roland finally invites himself into the house. His entry has marked the opening of the dialogue between two binary spaces, which becomes visible through Roland and Osvald. From their conversations, we come to know that Osvald is an artist, who makes a living by making traffic signs of danger and warnings, while Roland works in the advertising business and has an apartment and a Japanese car, who boasts to make a pretty good living together with Laura (yet, it is revealed later that this is merely a facade as they still struggle to make ends meet). Laura, on the other hand, occupies the middle ground between the two opposites. Not

only does she work as a translator by profession, she is the reason that ‘translation’ becomes necessary and possible. The love for Laura enables Roland and Oswald to communicate ‘bilingually’, a key feature of the borderland as Lotman describes (Lotman 2001, p. 142). In this particular ‘border-space’, the ‘mixed language’ is manifested in the talk of love (a non-monetary entity) in terms of monetary exchange. In the man-to-man talk, Oswald makes a seemingly absurd proposal to Roland, offering him money to give up Laura and forget all about her. The reemergence of jazz music and the shaking camera shot from Roland’s point of view all bear witness to the intense activities between two spaces - the penetration of the urban into the rural, the rural into the urban - in collision as well as in dialogue. The next sequence takes place outside the house, by the river Oswald and Roland continue their ‘negotiation’, trying to reach an agreeable sum. ‘Take it easy. It wouldn’t make you a bad person. It’s only a proposal. You simply agree or disagree’, says Oswald. When Roland jumps into the river to save the stack of crispy US banknotes thrown away by Oswald, it becomes clear that a deal worthy of one billion US dollar in cash has gradually re-shifted the focal point towards the urban space. The agitated Roland has regained the dominance in the situation and started swearing at Oswald in English.

Later, the dialogue in the border-space takes a new form, with Laura herself acting as the ‘translator’ of the two opposite spaces. Surprisingly, Laura is not offended by the ‘tacit agreement’ between Oswald and Roland, of which she is treated as a marketable object. After hearing Oswald’s recounts of how he has received four billion US dollar from a golden fish in exchange for its freedom (a reworking of a Russian fairy tale), she gladly accepts the idea of exchange and immediately starts making future business plans. Here the role of Laura reflects the gender imbalances that are characteristic of the post-Soviet Estonian society.¹¹ We later find out that Roland soon

¹¹ Marion Pajumets’s recent research on the reconstruction of masculine identities in contemporary Estonia finds that, despite Estonia’s shift to the West and adoption of the democratic model at the macro-level, the application of ‘anti-egalitarian, patriarchal discursive strategies’ remains paradoxically prevalent among Estonian men and women at the micro-level (Pajumets 2012, pp. 58-9). She argues that, these strategies can be read in part as a form of ‘reactionary’ response against ‘hypocritical socialist gender system’ and ‘Soviet gender equality propaganda’ (ibid.), revealing the interplay between structures and agencies.

regrets his decision of trading love for money and persuades Laura to go home with him. What follow are numerous individual talks between Laura-Osvald and Laura-Roland. Laura assures Osvald that she is staying with him and his dream, the miracle he has always longed for has come true. At the same time, she tries to convince Roland that they are not well-off, they need the money; the dubious source of money is beside the point, it is plain stupid and irrational to let the opportunity go away. She has come up with a new idea: to get rid of Osvald, in that case they can have both four billions and love/happiness.

Before us is an image of two incompatible worlds - improbable world of fairy-tale (Osvald's uncertainty of whether or not the miracle is genuine) and probable world of profit-making opportunity (Roland's concern over whether the money is real or not). Laura has the capacity to act as the mediator because she holds the keys to both sides - Osvald's tale of the golden fish and Roland's financial situation - based on which she is able to come up with a third option between the ideal and the realistic. It can be seen as an example of what Lotman describes as 'semiotic dynamism', that tension in the border area generates new information (*ibid.*, p. 134). We are then shown that the disillusioned Osvald decides to give up all the money to Laura and Roland in order to keep the memory of his miracle, which indicates a further shift towards the urban.

Closer to the end, a mafia-like man (again, Emil Urbel) in black suit drives to the cabin with the pizza that they have ordered earlier and a gun, exposing Osvald's story as a lie. The truth is he left boxes of cash there for storage. He confronts Osvald, 'do you know of any alternatives to my story?' This is answered with a moment of silence. He also takes back the mobile phone and magazine that he left behind on his last visit. Here, the mafia represents the new centre. He possesses the symbols of the new post-Soviet Estonian reality - money (wealth), car (mobility), gun (power), pizza (Western outlook), mobile phone (Nordic image) and magazine (cosmopolitan knowledge). The centrality of his presence has the effect of exhausting the 'reserve of indeterminacy', making translation and bilingualism impossible. This is evident in the

silence on the part of Oswald, Roland and Laura. The narrative presented by mafia has become the only possible one. In the finale, the camera brings us back to our very first image of Laura and Roland: two lovers hitchhiking on the same highway. They get into the same car, yet unlike what happened at the beginning of the film, this time the car has not pulled off at the crossroads. It keeps moving ahead. A close-up shot reveals that the driver is the mafia, and we realise from from a golden fish decoration that he is also the golden fish. Laura and Roland remain in love, Oswald resumes his mundane life in the cabin. By connecting the closing scene to the opening scene, the journey of the hitchhiking lovers has completed a full circle: they are back to where they set out. It seems that nothing has been changed by this journey, neither the characters nor the environment, or as if suggesting that the journey has never taken place - it is simply an unrealised alternative ending.

Although some critics consider *The Highway Crossing* the Estonian version of *Indecent Proposal* (1993) - 'a drama about greed, money, love and betrayal' (Toms 2006), close inspection of the film has revealed its address to a specific reality - the rapidly changing post-Soviet Estonian context. In light of Lotmanian notion of boundary, the antithesis of 'urban/rural' is conceptualised not as statistic, but rather it finds expression in various forms within the narrative as the protagonists' journey unfolds. The initial opposition is situated between 'monetary (cash)/non-monetary (love)'. When 'love' is translated into the monetary domain, this opposition is later replaced by that of 'probable (opportunity)/improbable (fairy-like miracle)'. When the improbable (fairy-tale) ceases to be a viable option, it is then substituted by the opposition of 'realistic possibility/ actual reality'. Instead of a complete dominance of the urban over rural space, this film displays a more complex spatial structure and reveals a subtler employment of the tensions between urban and rural spaces to engage with the transforming and transformed reality and identity in Estonia. In this film, the rural, as epitomised by its inhabitant Oswald, is given a contradictory character. On one hand, it is associated with folk-tale, miracle and dream of idealised times; on the other, it is endowed with hard cash, king of contemporary capitalist reality. The demise of the

bilingualism at the end testifies to the rift between traditional (yet romanticised) and modern (capitalist) values and, the impossibility of a new identity built on the unrealistic vision of an unlikely reconciliation of the two. The ending of the film has clearly implied that the alternative ostensibly held by the rural is nothing more than a disillusion, leaving the return to the full-speed highway - the capitalist urban - as the only viable path. Notwithstanding, the ambiguous figure of the driver/golden fish leaves a trace of uncertainty, suggesting that chance and disillusion goes hand in hand, a scenario which even a return to the original highway crossing cannot completely avoid.

3.2 The Road from Zero: *Made in Estonia* (2003) & *186 Kilometers* (2007)

Two films of ‘The Road from Zero’ depict the journeys of protagonists, who are perceived as the ‘losers’ by urban-dwellers. What is unique to these journeys from Tallinn to rural south is the intertwining of personal and national trajectories of transformation in the specific post-Soviet Estonian context. Explicit references to Estonia within films’ titles and narratives and implicit links between the narrated micro-level changes occurred in the lives of the protagonists and the actual and recent macro-level developments in Estonia, specifically, its accessions to the EU and NATO, illustrate the films’ larger theme: the exploration of contemporary Estonian identity. The filmic rural milieus are linked with the ‘traditional’ elements alongside ‘contemporary’ urban milieus; *Made in Estonia* explores their potential conjunction, *186 Kilometers* their disjuncture, reflecting subtle differences in filmmakers’ views on the construction of national identity.

***Made in Estonia* (2003)**

The spatial world captured in Rando Pettai’s *Made in Estonia* is multilayered. Based on a real-life cultural phenomenon in contemporary Estonia, the film tells the

story of two male radio DJs - Norm (Henrik Normann) and Mill (Madis Milling) - who produce live sketch shows where each one of them plays the roles of one female and one male fictional characters in the world they create. The narrative alternates between the 'real' world of the main protagonist DJ Norm and the 'imaginary' world of the other main fictional protagonist Väino (also starred by Henrik Normann). The situation is similar to the 'film within the film', or an instance of what Lotman calls the 'text within the text' (Lotman 2009, p. 69). In the film, we can easily identify two discrete but interrelated texts: the first text concerns the events taken place in DJ Norm's radio studio in Tallinn, while the second text narrates the events occurred during Väino's 'forced' relocation from Tallinn to the remote countryside in southern Estonia. According to Lotman, 'text within the text' involves the switching of perspectives between texts of different 'codifications', thereby highlighting the 'ludic quality' of the texts and the fluidity of the boundaries of texts (ibid.). This playfulness arising from the crossing of boundaries between primary and inserted text is rather apparent in this film. Given the live nature of the sketch shows, the intrusions of one text into the other are often seen within the film, with fragments of Norm's world penetrating into Väino's world and in a lesser degree the other way round. In this regard the two texts engage in a dialogue and the narrated events in both texts can be considered as in part the result of that process.

Boundary, in Lotman's conceptualisation, has the dual function of separation and connection. The first part of the film focuses on the demarcation of two heterogeneous spaces, i.e. primary text and inserted text, through the contrast between the milieus and the respective main protagonists. The camera first takes us to Norm's living space in a radio studio in Tallinn. Despite his unique sense of humour in the sketches, Norm in real life is reserved, tongue-tied and a target of co-workers' bullying. He works and lives in the studio, 'a gypsy camp', a depressing and an enclosed space deprived of sunlight and fresh air. In stark contrast, Väino, the fictional character he creates, is passionate and cheerful, a comic but amiable personality emanating the aura of Monsieur Hulot in Jacques Tati's films. While Norm is framed in his artificial surrounding with mostly

fixed shots and a cool tone of colour, Väino is shown in tracking shots with an extensive use of bright and warm colour. His presence is mobile and immersed in the open air.

These contrasting portrayals express the mirror-like relationship between Norm and Väino: Väino is what Norm is not. Yet, they are very much alike in the sense that both are perceived as the ‘losers’ in terms of the dominant values in contemporary Estonia, i.e. they have neither a proper home nor a wife. From this point of view, Väino can be seen as Norm’s *‘alter ego’*. But the situation is more complicated. Let us not to forget that Norm impersonates two fictional characters, Väino and Maie, the wife of Väino’s best friend Valdur (also, Madis Milling). Maie is an ambiguous character, who finds every opportunity to ridicule Väino’s failure, his homeless and wifeless status, and at the same time acts as Väino’s source of impetus, helping him with home decoration and advertisement posting for ‘a woman (wife)’ on newspaper. Norm’s *‘alter ego’* is not just one but spilt into two fictional characters. Norm puts into the mouth of Maie his ‘realistic’ thoughts and of Väino his ‘truest’ and somewhat ‘nostalgic’ feelings. With the element of *‘alter ego’*, the main function of ‘text within the text’ lies in using the inserted text as an entrance into the inner state of the primary text, rather than using ‘fictionality’ of the former to underscore the ‘reality’ of the latter.

The next segment introduces another boundary within the inserted text, one that lies between urban and rural spaces. Following Väino on his way home, we are confronted with the demolition of his ‘home’ by the government: the walls are gone, leaving pieces of furniture stand forlornly in ruins. The conversation between Väino and the site manager casts light on the central theme of ‘home’ in the road motif of this particular film as well as some paradoxical aspects of Väino’s ‘home’.

Väino: ‘Did you have to tear down this lot?’

Manager: ‘This in here and many others! Think about all the people in Estonia who have never lived in Tallinn!’

Väino: ‘So you just cross my life out altogether?’

Manager: 'You don't even have a letterbox! What's the use of weeping for that life?'

The dialogue together with the demolishing scene show that Väino's home occupies a frontier zone at two levels: 'home-anti-home' and 'centre-periphery'. Regarding the former, Väino does have a 'home' but it is almost non-existent, as home is where he slept last night; his home has a locality but no coordinates in the absence of letterbox; the interior of his 'home' is now exposed around construction machinery. All these suggest that Väino's so-called 'home' oscillates between 'home' and 'anti-home'. At the other level, the destruction of his 'home' visualises the process of the centre expanding into the periphery or the periphery pushing towards the centre. Like the highway in *The Highway Crossing*, Väino's flat functions as the 'outer limit' of the centre.

Another episode taken place in the ruins is also of particular significance, in which Väino is interviewed by a Lithuanian TV reporter who mocks Estonia's desperation for the NATO membership. The reporter points out that, '[w]e found out the Estonian words "North" and "bottom" sound the same'. The opposite of 'north/south' is complemented by the other axis of 'bottom/top'. Thus, Väino's southward spatial movement from Tallinn to the countryside, where the farmhouse compensated by the government is located, represents not only a descent from the centre to the periphery, but also implies an ascent from bottom to top in the symbolic sense.

As Väino embarks on his involuntary journey, the co-existence of two semiotic spaces - the urban and the rural - and the dialogic activities between them become evident especially in relation to the theme of 'home'. There emerge essentially two different views of 'home'. When city-dwellers Maie, Valdur and Silvi (also by Madis Milling) come to visit Väino, they bring along a bulk of belongings such as clothing and home decorative items to turn the house into a home, where the absence of 'a woman's touch' is noted. However, in this new place everyone and everything is known by proper name, including the pigs prepared for meals; Väino is also accepted by local people.

Specificity and familiarity have replaced the anonymity and alienation that characterise the urban space. From one perspective, 'home' is defined in terms of material elements of market values, the possession of objects, which in a sense includes women/wives as characterised in the Estonian context.¹² From the other, 'home' is characterised by its intrinsic values such as the intimacy and the sense of belonging. Väino's new place, subject to differing criteria, can be seen as either a false or a genuine 'home'; thereby, the shift from the urban to the rural can be perceived as a state of degeneration in one sense, or of elevation in another.

The dialogue between urban and rural spaces taking place within the inserted text is reflected by changes in the characters. The rural space, initially portrayed in an inferior light, is now conceived as a land of nourishment for urbanites. Väino has transformed from a marginalised character into a 'man of action' and become desired by women. In the end, he even makes huge profits by selling his farmhouse to the NATO as an aviation base. Changes have also been observed in Maie, albeit much less radical in extent. Maie begins to enjoy the countryside, loosening up her city-dweller mentality, and after an accident her means of transportation has changed from car to wheelchair, which virtually places her closer to the land and the tempo of the rural.

The final sequence of the film shows the reinvention of Väino into a legend. The newspaper headline - 'Farmer earns millions selling his land to the NATO' - has said it all. Väino becomes the representative of Estonia to receive a NATO General, who boasts about himself chasing after his dreams and getting the fame and lots of women, which echos Väino's personal success story. We are shown that Väino has moved into a grand, luxurious mansion in an undefined location with Gerli, the female double character that Norm/Väino is in love with. This is cut to the last scene of the film that discloses the point of intersection between the primary and inserted texts, in which Norm, on the way to his newly found apartment, has caught a glimpse of the fictional

¹² As pointed out by Barbi Pilvre, the influx of Western consumerism following Estonia's independence attributes to the acceptance of the 'commodification' of women as part of the post-Soviet reality, rather than perceiving it as something essentially negative (Pilvre 2000, p. 68).

characters he creates, Maie and Valdur, who are driving in the city centre of Tallinn, with Maie whining to Valdur about the missed opportunities of selling their land. Whether the scene is a mirage or not, the narratives of the two texts are visually interwoven, foregrounding the connection of the lives of various main protagonists. The film concludes with a hopeful note: a close-up shot of Norm's smile and glittering eyes from a low angle, signifying the closing of one journey and the opening of another.

In analysing the artistic strategies for staging national identity in *Made in Estonia*, Alo Joosepson and Ester Võsu argue that the film deploys a strategy of staging 'a deconstructed national identity', which refers to 'the state of high self-reflexivity in which the existing elements of national identity are re-examined, re-conceptualised and re-evaluated' (Joosepson & Võsu 2005, p. 425). According to them, by means of 'deconstructive methods' ('parody, irony, travesty and slapstick humour') (ibid., p. 465), the film seeks to deconstruct, albeit not to destroy utterly, some of the defining constitutive elements of traditional national identity, particularly, the 'traditional, conservative self-models of Estonians' and the 'bonds with the homestead' (ibid., p. 448; p. 465). In their view, the film narrates a 'successfully transforming hero' (Väino) to criticise the unchanging 'escapist' (Norm), addressing 'new aspects of national identity' (which also include 'the enjoyment of life, a modern home in the city') (ibid., pp. 445-7; pp. 465-6). They argue that the deconstructive strategy of the film exposes the 'inadequacy [of the traditional national values] in the contexts of rapidly changing Estonian lifestyles and the corresponding everyday lived identities' (ibid., p. 448).

It is true that a great part of the film revisits and explores the conceptions of 'rural/countryside' and 'home', themes that are fundamental to the make-up of Estonianness; however, it is argued that the film tends to emphasise more on the potential than the 'inadequacy' of the traditional values in the construction of a new national identity in Estonia today. Aided by Lotmanian concept of boundary and the mechanism of 'text within the text', our analysis permits us to see, through the dialogue between the primary and inserted texts, a triumphant story of the 'transformed and

adaptive self' (Väino *and* Norm) over the 'less reflective self' (Maie); and, through the dialogue between urban and rural spaces, the potential reserve held by the rural space in times of transformation.

The final success of an old and congenial protagonist, the film's Estonian title - *Vanad ja kobedad saavad jalad alla* ('The Old and the Bold Get on Their Feet') (ibid., p. 444) and the news headline reading 'Farmer earns millions selling his land to the NATO', taken together, challenge the typically fixed types of the actual and potential 'winner' and 'loser' in transitional post-Soviet Estonian society, of which the new elite is characterised by the common traits of youth, urban background and family of high education and social status, who have the knowledge and resources to succeed in the new reality (Lauristin & Vihalemm 1997, p. 109). In this sense, *Made in Estonia* is critical of the post-Soviet national trajectory en route to the West, in which the old and the rural are left out of that process. It is however crucial to note that, despite the criticism, the film has not rejected but affirmed the new values in the post-Soviet Estonia. At the end of the film, both celebrated protagonists - Väino and Norm - have not gone astray from the prevalent definition of 'success' in the society: Väino becomes a wealthy and famous man with a wife, while Norm finally starts to embrace his city life, moving into an apartment outside the studio. As such, it is less an anti-modernisation or anti-Westernisation film than a critique of the unexamined and totalising path in the search for contemporary Estonian identity in the post-Soviet period.

186 Kilometers (2007)

Originally titled as *Jan Uuspõld läheb Tartusse*, *186 Kilometers* follows the journey of the main protagonist Jan Uuspõld, an acclaimed high-art theatre actor turned mediocre commercial comedian, who suddenly walks out of his 'Beer Show' series one day and decides to return to his root, by taking up a role in a new Shakespearean play in

the Vanemuine Theatre in Tartu. The English title of the film refers to the very distance of the highway between the capital Tallinn and Tartu. From the outset, the parallel between the road trodden by the protagonist and the wider national trajectory is clearly conveyed. As the film opens, we are briefed by a mini report of the local radio station on the current state of affairs in today's Estonia. A rapid montage of bustling images of Estonian landscape (forest, wildlife, beaches, railway, etc.) and Estonian people, coupled with a cheerful off-screen voice announcing a host of good news from Estonia: 'Good morning, Estonia... A new section of two-line Tartu-Tallinn highway has been completed. The GNP of Estonia has risen to 5.3%... Unemployment has practically been wiped out... Estonian culture is on the world map...', sketching out the 'present Estonia' with a visual and verbal mix of 'facts' and 'fantasies'.

This scene expresses a state of becoming and serves as a point of reference of the allusion between personal and national crossings in search of identity. In a way, this 'Estonia-at-a-glance' report shows different perceptions of the self oscillating between reality and aspiration, so as the narrated experiences of Jan Uuspõld, which are fictional but not entirely unreal.¹³ The opening sequence depicts Estonia in its current state of development, while throughout the film we are repeatedly reminded of the 'turn of events' of the protagonist's life occurred four years ago which, given the film was released in 2007, brings us back to the year of 2003, one year before Estonia joining the EU and the NATO. From this narrative structure, we observe the entanglement of the journeys of an individual and a national collective, which run not only in parallel, but also in an intersectional manner: the spatial movement of the protagonist offers an opening into the temporal trajectory of Estonia, moving back and forth between the past and future. This crisscross structure finds expression throughout the film.

Similar to the protagonists of *Made in Estonia*, Jan Uuspõld (Jan Uuspõld) is portrayed as a 'loser', who does not fit well into the urban surrounding. His acting

¹³ The fusing of reality and fiction is further evident in the fact that several characters in the film take the real names of the actors who play the roles, not to mention that a number of Estonian politicians also starred in it, including the president Toomas Hendrik Ilves and the mayor of Tallinn Edgar Savisaar.

career and personal life have plunged into complete chaos: his descent from a highly acclaimed theatre actor to a second-rate showman, his drinking and financial problems make him into an object of ridicule from kids, acquaintances, and even his wife. Here Jan is shown as an ‘insider’ at times, an ‘outsider’ at other times, as manifested in his presence in the backstage of theatre, his own home, etc. It is crucial to recognise that such a shift of boundary is embedded in both spatial and temporal frame. For instance, Jan used to be one of ‘us’ at the theatre, yet following the parting, he becomes one of ‘others’ whom is then denied access to the space. Eventually, Jan is pushed out to jail for violation of social moral standard, where Jan first encounters his guardian angel Georg Ots (Tõnu Kilgas) - named after the renowned Estonian opera singer during the Soviet era, a prominent ‘national figure’ in the collective memories of the majority of the Estonians¹⁴ - who miraculously reappears from time to time offering Jan good advice when he has internal struggles on the road. After a brief stay in jail, Jan is offered by a friend to play a serious role in Tartu, and begins his hitchhiking journey.

The moral and symbolic dimension of this journey is not only hinted at during the prison scene, but also powerfully conveyed through the journey. As in *Made in Estonia*, the rural space is initially shown in an inferior light, thereby the road from the urban to the rural is perceived as an involuntary one. In a sense, it is like a journey of a pilgrim, the more challenging the path is, the more meaningful it becomes. It is also no coincidence that the protagonist covers part of the journey intermittently by foot. The geographical distance of 186 km, which can be easily covered in a 2.5 hours drive on the highway in real life, has extended into an almost insurmountable distance in the film, turning into a three-day road trip dotted with many detours, interruptions and accidents that obstruct the protagonist from getting back to the highway.

The highway, as the one in *The Highway Crossing*, acts as an indicator of the boundary between urban and rural spaces; however, in this particular film, given the central narrative structure, the highway is also a temporal marker drawing the line

¹⁴ I wish to thank Dr. Eva Närepea for bringing this underlying theme to my attention.

between present and past. In the American road movies, highway with all its expanse and speed is a particularly significant trope to signify the liberation of the character from the dominance of the norms and values (eds Cohan & Hark 1997). We find a degree of resemblance in the highway traversed by Jan. The majority of the remaining narrative focuses on Jan's encounters of different characters along the hitchhiking. At first glance, these events and characters in the realm of rural seem to be painted by a brush of bizarreness, parody and randomness, but as we look closer, the episodes encapsulate an assortment of disparate elements drawn from different chapters of Estonia's timeline. Here let us imagine: instead of having events taken place in a semiosphere of one locality (as in *The Highway Crossing*) or at a semiosphere of two levels (as in *Made in Estonia*), in this semiosphere we have individually bounded semiotic spaces of different periods and cultures of Estonia, which might otherwise seem enclosed and disjointed without their connection with the central narrative thread of 'the return to the Tallinn-Tartu highway' - the future goal of the protagonist. Moreover, the road leading to Tartu, known as the 'cultural capital' of Estonia, could be potentially a movement from one (political) centre to another (intellectual) centre through the anonymous rural, but this would require a shift in the Tallinn-oriented urban gaze to make room for a wider definition of the 'centre'.

The camera shows a diverse range of characters who in one way or another offer a ride to Jan en route to Tartu. These include a dubious guy involving in illegal trade, an obscure farmer couple who invites Jan to milk a cow and hint at having a threesome, a big provincial family in the middle of a funeral meal where men and women get into physical fights, a hippie wearing a pair of shoes passed down from the First Republic of Estonia who speaks of freewill and quotes the work of the Estonian intellectual Jaan Kaplinski, a well-known figure in Estonia's struggle for regaining independence, a group of Estonian soldiers who had previously served in Iran, two free-spirited lovers who practise tantra, a family living an eco-community with a chained slave at home and a Dad who talks about finding 'Estonia's Nokia' (a reference to the buzz phrase popularised by the speech of Estonia's former president Lennart Meri made in 1999

about the national search for a single product - 'a modern, homegrown Nokia equivalent' - which can place Estonia on the global map (Huang 2005, p. 107)), a forest village community where a 'Sing Along' TV show reminiscent of the Singing Revolution is staged and a well-off political couple who plans to open a monument in the city.

In these spaces off the highway, the most dominant marker of Jan's identity is his place of origin - Tallinn. At each of these encounters, he is referred by the local people in the rural as the famous comedian/actor from the city on that 'Beer Festival' TV series, and for this very association, he is welcome and even looked upon by the rural fellows. In these episodes, Jan functions as the fragment of the centre foraying into the periphery, stirring up the need of dialogues between the two and possibility of bilingualism in the border-space; however, his journey simultaneously exposes the incompatibility and untranslatability of the two spaces. This is reflected, for instance, in the reception of Jan's language in his exchanges with the local people, of which his jokes are interpreted as words of wisdom (by the provincial family), words of insult (by the soldiers), words of authority (by the village community) or even words of a nihilist (by the rich political couple). From these scenes, we are also shown various and conflicting descriptions of Jan from the points of view of local people of these discrete semiotic spaces, and their attempts to impose their own colours on Jan, transforming him according to their own idea of 'Jan', turning him into, for example, the 'deceased Peter' or a politician. As Lotman points out that, 'the untranslatability of translation is a bearer of valuable information' (Lotman, cited in Monticelli 2009, p. 335). In this particular instance, the 'valuable information' lies not in what cannot be translated, but the reckoning of the existing untranslatability. The exits of Jan from each of these encounters in the form of an escape are sharply portrayed, through which we witness Jan's embarkment on a journey of self-discovery through a gradual recognition of what he is not: the creation of 'self' against both the image of 'the others' and the image of the 'described self' imposed by the others.

We find in the conversations between Jan and his guardian angel Georg a strong association between the spatial crossing and the non-spatial path in search of identity. A good example of this is:

Georg: It seems to be that you lack a definite plan.

Jan: I have a plan.

Georg: You know what I'm talking about. Even if you have plan, you don't have the courage to see it through. You throw yourself around from here to there, promise something to everybody, stay in debt. What have you achieved during your life?

What is often highlighted in the 'internal dialogue' between Jan and Georg is not only the *personal goals* but also, of equal importance, the *means of achieving them*. The ideas of 'courage', 'boldness', 'concentration' and 'creativity' are emphasised. In the end, Jan has found his way back to the highway and finally arrived at Tartu, for the new role. Outside the Vanemuine Theatre, we hear again one of the many phone conversations he has with his wife on and off through the journey but this time his own, independent voice has emerged: 'Why don't you ever believe what I'm saying. Look. *What Tallinn does to people.*' This last sentence is particularly telling: for the very first time, Jan is able to speak of the urban/centre and its negative aspect at an objective distance. As we follow him entering into the theatre, we realise that after the crossing from the urban to the rural, his tie with the city remain but in a markedly different way.

186 Kilometers reflects not only the life of a protagonist whose personal choices and experiences are entangled with the contemporary developments in Estonian society but it also depicts aspects of the transforming post-Soviet Estonian reality. Given the interlacing of personal and national trajectories, the narrative of the protagonist's pursuit of identity has acquired a collective dimension. As the analysis has shown, Jan's hitchhiking represents a traverse across spatial (urban/rural), temporal (present reality/national past) and symbolic (Western values/ traditional values) boundaries. Jan's

journey signifying a return to the root initially seems to convey a sense that there exists a 'true' identity preserved and can be retrieved in cultural traditions and the national past, hinting at the possibility of (re)constructing an identity through a retrospective search. However, as the narrative develops, it becomes clear that neither the rural nor the urban offers a refuge with which the protagonist can identify. Instead, he is constantly shown in escape, one after another. He first gets away from the city and then from each of the encounters during the journey. The historical past of Estonia, pictured in the form of these disrupted, fragmented and mingled encounters, shows no viable relationship with the protagonist's current path towards the future. Perhaps, the only point of reference it offers is its ruptured relationship with the present. The ending of the film implies that, in this particular road motif, the incongruence and conflicts between the urban and the rural, the past and the present are not to be reconciled but to be transcended to the future represented by the protagonist's destination - Tartu. In the examination of the identity crisis and anxiety that arises from the increasing integration with the West facing post-Soviet Estonia, especially the allegorical connection with the crucial participation in the EU and NATO, the film refuses to provide any easy way out in the form of a romanticised vision of the country's historical narrative - distant and recent past - which in fact, as visualised (and problemised) in the film, is neither lineal nor unified. It is through the victorious story of Jan - a transformed individual with a new sense of direction, a regained control of his life and a critical perspective towards the wider situation he is embedded in - that the film speaks eloquently to what is lacking in the larger course of transition and pursuit of national identity in post-Soviet Estonia.

3.3 The Road to Zero: *Mindless* (2006) & *The Temptation of St. Tony* (2009)

In the two films under 'The Road of Zero', we register without difficulty the moral values accorded to the filmic urban and rural spaces, illustrating what Lotman describes, '[n]otions of moral value and of locality fuse together: places have a moral significance and morals have a localized significance.' (Lotman 2001[1990], p. 172).

The opposition of 'urban/rural' is closely associated with variants of antithesis such as 'good/bad', 'spiritual/material', 'heavenly/earthly', etc. Unlike the 'loser' protagonists, these two protagonists - the 'winners' of new, post-Soviet reality - have a 'home' in the city, hence, their seemingly 'unnecessary' crossings through the rural symbolise purposeful journeys of moral regeneration.

Mindless (2006)

Mindless, in essence, tells the story of a protagonist bordering between sanity and insanity, with one foot in the material world, the other in the spiritual world, whose source of ambivalence lies in the wider political, socio-economic transformation undergone by the Estonian society during the transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet periods. The first few scenes of the film have established the key role of the protagonist Toomas Jaansoo (Rain Simmul), a successful businessman in the post-Soviet Estonia, as the boundary differentiating and connecting various sets of heterogeneous and conflicting spaces throughout the film narrative. He epitomises and enacts the dialogue between the spaces, in other words, he functions as both the marker and translator of binary spaces. In this particular film, the boundaries are expressed through not only the protagonist but also the use of a gamut of repeated visual and auditory signs that are meticulously composed to signify specific spaces.

The first sequence of the film focuses on the contrast between the urban and the rural. In *Mindless*, however, the beginning of the film offers an additional temporal dimension to the urban space. The film opens with the voice-over of the protagonist narrating his 'confession' in the court about why he wishes to be locked up for life in prison. The camera shows in flashbacks the young Toomas in the Soviet Estonian period, a rebellious figure who put on an astronaut costume on school ceremony to embarrass the authority and who stole a friend's bride at the wedding on the groom's playful request but then made her his own wife. Next, we meet Toomas at the present

time, where he is framed in an ascending glass-walled elevator, motionless and emotionless, which is intercut with the exterior reflections of the glass skyscrapers outside. Toomas's voice-over continues to tell us how he has transformed into a prosperous man over the last decade, step by step: secretaries, cars, houses, overseas holidays, gold cards and finally his company has become the exclusive dealer of Nokia in the Baltic region. Such an imagery of material abundance stands in sharp contrast to the next scene, in which Toomas is shown standing in front of the court explaining his sudden decision of taking a year off to live in the forest alone in search of the meanings of life. Toomas's life story of the recent years is significant to the demarcation of boundaries in two ways. First, it signifies a past shift of boundaries in the society, for Toomas used to be a peripheral figure who was constantly 'on the brink of being expelled' but today he situates right at the heart of the political and economic centre - the financial hub in the capital Tallinn. With his career success as Nokia's regional exclusive dealer, he has turned himself from a deviant individual into a normal figure, in the sense that he is a quintessence of the prevailing cultural norms, values and rational behaviours of the contemporary Estonian society.¹⁵ Even though it is not explicitly stated, when we read the film within the specific Estonian context, the shift hints at the radical changes of the larger situation arising from the restoration of independence in the early 1990s. Second, the antithesis that is activated in this part is that of 'urban/rural' as well as of 'material/spiritual'. While the urban represents the centre of the material world, the rural represents the centre of the spiritual world. The interconnectedness between these two axes of antithesis is fundamental to the reading of the film's central themes. Taken together, these two aspects indicate that not only is the spatial journey from the urban to the rural a search for moral and spiritual values, but also, to be more accurate, a process of moral regeneration and the reclaiming of what have been lost.

¹⁵ In the specific context of post-Soviet Estonia, the Finnish mobile phone brand 'Nokia' is ascribed profound symbolism. In addition to the aforementioned allusion to Estonia's search of a national brand made by the former president Lennart Meri, according to Margit Keller, mobile phone at large is 'a consumer item with a particularly high sign value' in the transitional Estonian society (Keller 2004, p. 57). She argues that the representations of mobile phone in print advertisements in the first decade of independent Estonia reflect a shift in the discourse on freedom. Freedom is increasingly conceptualised in terms of individual choices in the consumption of products and styles, rather than defined in political and economic terms.

The binary between 'urban' and 'rural', alongside the associated link with 'material/ spiritual' opposition, is effectively built up in the depiction of Toomas's departure from the city and his arrival to the countryside with the aid of a variety of cinematic devices. The cityscape is dominated by the visuals of glass buildings, distorted reflections (of the sky and aeroplane), enclosed spaces and a nocturnal aerial view of the city, coupled with auditory elements such as deafening noises of plane engine and loud disco music. Together these invoke a sense of detachment, alienation and indifference in the urban environment. A typical example can be found in the farewell conversation between Toomas and his estranged teenage son Tanel via online messenger. In this scene, Toomas is shown talking to Tanel, who barely responds to his father's leaving and whose face and silhouette is virtually trapped in the small chat-box displayed on the computer screen. On the contrary, the rural landscape is primarily pictured as lush and wooded in the daytime. Despite that it does not mean the rural is necessarily more valued than the urban. In fact, the urban and rural spaces are set in a much more complex hierarchy. We are faced with not one but three different images of the rural, which are disclosed in three stops during Toomas's search for his 'dream cottage' in the countryside. At the first stop, Toomas is introduced by a property agent to a newly developed high-end eco-village where there is no shortage of urban luxury and comfort. In this case, the rural is like the transposed urban space, its equivalent counterpart through the prism of the material world. The second stop is a desolate village that Toomas accidentally stumbles upon when he has lost his way in the forest. It is a place inhabited by people living on the periphery - the impoverished, unemployed and drunken villagers - who obviously fail to adapt to the economic restructuring from a planned economy to a market economy in the post-Soviet Estonia. Here the rural is materially inferior to the urban. A once-professional-tractor-driver leads Toomas to the third, and in fact, the final stop where he decides to settle down for his 'gap year' - an isolated, abandoned cottage in the forest by a natural 'Lake Relief'. In this very space, the material influence is almost entirely absent but because of that it acquires its spiritual quality and announces its superiority over the others. The camera pictures an

idyllic, pure and nourished landscape, where everything is visually and aurally alive and in motion - groups of ants dragging wood chips, the sounds of animals and the wind, moving lake water, echoes from the core of trees, shifting sunlight and alike. On the geographical plane, there are urban and rural spaces; on the symbolic plane, there are material and spiritual spaces. If we put two planes together, we discern many overlaps between them but they are not coterminous. On close examination, we register the essential differences in their boundaries and thus arrive at a finer typology: 'material urban', 'material rural', 'spiritual rural' and 'in-between rural', the ambiguous space to which the villagers belong. In fact, much of the film's narrative focuses on the tensions among these spaces.

As we have already mentioned, for Lotman the boundary is ambivalent. It acts not as a wall but a 'filtering membrane' (Lotman 2001[1990], p. 137), making semiotic exchange possible. The same processes of translation between the centre and the periphery can be observed in majority of the narrated events unfolding in the spiritual space where Toomas functions as a translator between the material and spiritual spaces. As soon as Toomas settles in the cottage, individual villagers start coming to him for information and advice on whether he knows the whereabouts of their relatives living in Tallinn and the life in the city in general, and if he can show them the ways to achieve goodness and happiness. In a sense, Toomas has become the villagers' window to both worlds. One night, he is visited by a fairy, a beautiful nameless woman, who shows up at his door. Across the table filled with brightly-lit white candles, she offers to sleep with him and some advice on creating his own 'religion' with the aid of rituals and costume. The next morning the fairy disappears in thin air. A montage of shots shows Toomas preparing for his first religious sermon, finding the clothing with a religious touch and a wooden board for producing spiritual tapping sounds, which is then cut to the scene of which the villagers are making their way to the evening sermon taking place in the forest near Toomas's cottage. Sitting around the bonfires, the camera captures the close-ups of the villagers, who are absorbed and amused by Toomas's prayer, which is filled with the imagery of light and bees, as well as his tapping and

dancing. The appearance of the fairy reminds us of other *alter ego* characters found in other films of the same corpus. Like Georg in *186 kilometers*, the fairy reflects the protagonist's internal struggle, which as seen in this film, is concerned with Toomas's threshold from material to spiritual world. The shifting of the spiritual space to the centre is also expressed through an elaborate set of images (candlelight, fireplace, bonfires and light) and sounds (tapping against the wooden board and imitative buzzing of bees). The imagescape and soundscape play an important role in creating an atmospheric boundary of this specific space.

If this sequence highlights the growing centrality of the spiritual space, the subsequent one depicts the resistance of the material space, suggesting a reversal of the currents of force. This is first introduced by the visits of the city-dwellers - Toomas's wife Anu (Anne Reemann) and his business partner Pete (Indrek Taalmaa). Not only do they bring along elements and objects of the material space, their very appearances are also accompanied by the sound of urban tonality. We hear a faint sound of plane engine emerging in the background. Yet, the ultimate invasion of the material space into the spiritual space is marked by Anu and Pete's successful attempts to take away all of Toomas's money, either by divorcing him or transferring his company shares. At this point, Toomas is pushed out of the material world and belongs to the spiritual world only. The change of currents' direction is also reflected in the villagers' behaviours. One day, an old village couple comes to Toomas for sparing them 3000 Estonian kroon to buy something that they have yet to figure out. Even though knowing Toomas's entire wealth has vanished, they have no sympathy for him but still try to squeeze his money down to the last kroon.

Towards the end of the film, villagers stop coming to the sermon. When asked why this is so, a villager friend of Toomas's replies:

Uugu: They said you're not quite normal in your head. You've given away your money and murdered your wife.

Toomas: And?

Uugu: Why should we listen to a poor fool's gibberish?

Toomas: But they did before?

Uugu: You were rich. It's interesting to hear what a rich man has to say. A rich man knows how things work in the world.

This conversation is particularly telling. In the eyes of the villagers, the penniless Toomas has lost his capacity as the translator between the material and spiritual spaces. Without his link to the material space, the perception of his so-called preaching has changed from the words of a (very rich) wise man to the gibberish of a (poor) fool. From this we discover that, the ambiguous 'space in between' occupied by the villagers is in fact part of the material world. When Toomas considers himself as the messenger of the spiritual values, he is however perceived as the messenger of the material, monetary values of the city.

The final shot in the countryside is highly symbolic. We are confronted with a quick cut of disorienting images of the cottage from outside, from a close-up to a long-distance aerial view, before intercut with a very big close-up of Toomas. We hear the plane explosion, and from the reflection of his sad, watery eyes, we see the flames in the sky. This is cut to the opening scene - Toomas's confession in the court - that he declares himself to be guilty of causing that 'non-existent' air crash. Yet, Toomas is convinced that he has the spiritual power to create the accident (disasters) and he tries to prove it by ordering rain (miracles). In the end, when everyone except his wife has left the court, rain starts falling. Miracle does happen. In these two scenes from the film's last sequence, the cross-overs of spaces are most apparent. In the plane crash, we are able to discern the intermingling of recurrent symbols of material (aeroplane) and spiritual (fire) worlds; likewise, in the court scene, we find the laws of the human/material world and of natural/spiritual world.

Evidently, the film focuses primarily on the socio-economic aspects of Estonia's transition in the recent years, in particular, the sweeping dominance of capitalist values and consumerism. Through the portrayal of the urban and rural landscapes, this film not only exposes the magnitude of impacts brought by the transformation on the lives and environments of both spaces in reality, but also delves into the moral dimension of Estonia's re-Westernization. According to Marju Lauristin, one of the profound societal changes during Estonia's return to the West is that of the value systems and mentality - the shift from the 'collectivist' of the Soviet era to the 'individualist' of the post-Soviet era based on the Western values (Lauristin 1997, pp. 36-40). She argues that there is a tendency of a redefinition of the notions of success, achievement, guilt and responsibility in the Estonian society, shifting 'towards more individualistic value orientations, and away from the collective ethnic goals and values possessed in the initial stage of mobilization' (ibid., p. 40). Such an individualistic approach to 'success/failure' and 'guilt/responsibility' is well manifested in the opening and concluding sequences of the film through the protagonist. If Toomas's journey is triggered by a personal identity crisis in the first place, his later attempts at preaching to the village community has undoubtedly unravelled the collective nature of the issue, and thereby framing the quest of moral regeneration and redemption in a broader national context. Then, we cannot help but wonder: can Toomas succeed in achieving his mission? The miracle happening at the close of the film might lead us to give a positive answer to the question; however, when we read the film through the prism of the four recognizable spaces (material urban, material rural, spiritual rural and in-between space), it becomes evident that the reclaiming of moral values and spirituality is deemed to be unlikely - a merely wishful thinking of a 'fool' - in the new and vastly transformed situation in the post-Soviet Estonia. The capitalist mentality and materialistic desire have permeated across the rural. Towards the end of the film the 'authentic/pure' image of the rural landscape in the mind of the protagonist is substituted with a comparatively 'realistic' vision of the rural milieu found in contemporary Estonia, one that witnesses the privatization of land, suburbanisation, commercialisation, individualism and money-oriented mentality. In times of immense transformation, the already reconstructed rural

space is beyond conversion. At best, it might be argued that the film permits a 'reflective, not restorative, nostalgia' that characterises the private sphere in post-Soviet Estonian society (Kannike 2013, p. 14). Perhaps, the only hint of optimism we can find in the concluding 'miracle' is the possibility of moral regeneration at a personal level. It remains a little secret between Toomas and Anu.

The Temptation of St. Tony (2009)

The reference of the film's title to *The Temptation of St. Anthony* announces the resemblance of the protagonist's journey in the contemporary world to the ancient path of Saint Anthony, who struggles to resist suffering and temptations inflicted by evil spirits (Jacobs 2000, p. 1036). This allusion to a voyage of redemption resonates with a quote from Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* (Inferno, Song I) found in the opening title sequence that reads, 'Midway upon the journey of our life/ I found myself within forest dark/ For the straightforward pathway had been lost'. The protagonist Tony/Tõnu (Taavi Eelmaa), a mid-level factory manager, is caught between the worlds of morality and immorality, between the affluent urban and the deprived rural. Yet, unlike Toomas who is the urban representative *par excellence*, Tony exemplifies an aspired individual of rural family background who strives for urban success, who stands inside and outside of both spaces. What is important in our reading of *The Temptation of St. Tony* is to recognise the abstract, fluidic and porous qualities of the boundaries throughout the film, as visible and concrete geographical markers of boundary (e.g. highway or the road) between urban and rural spaces are not foregrounded.

Boundary, as Lotman sees it, is a mechanism of translation; and, the borderland is referred to as a domain of bilingualism and polylingualism characterised by semiotic dynamism (Lotman 2001 [1990]). In this film, these ambivalent and permeable qualities of boundary, and the intermingling and intersecting aspects of semiotic dialogic activities of binary spaces are most vividly represented. As we shall see, the urban and

rural spaces portrayed in this film have neither clearly defined nor fixed boundaries. Rather, they are constantly in juxtaposition; the boundaries between them are at once concealed and exposed. Another key aspect in the interpretation of the film lies in the implicit link between the protagonist's journey and the wider contemporary reality of the Estonian society. Shot in black-and-white, *The Temptation of St. Tony* tends to efface the specifics of the spatial and temporal context of the narrated events, an attempt that seems to accentuate the universality of the subject matters. Although we are offered few details of the exact location and period in which the protagonist is situated, we are still able to recognise the portrayal of the post-Soviet, capitalist Estonian society through the appearance of implicit references. In this regard, the themes of the film can be read as both universal and Estonia-specific.

As hinted by the quote from *The Divine Comedy*, 'forest' plays a central role in the entire narrative. In fact, we might even think of the posit of 'home' of the urban space in opposition to 'forest' (anti-home) of the rural space as the basis from which a whole range of associated oppositions is developed, e.g. 'own/theirs', 'life/death', 'safe/dangerous', 'organised/chaotic', 'happiness/suffering', 'abundance/barren' and 'materialistic/mystical' (ibid.). The film begins with the visit of city-dweller protagonist Tony to the rural for his father's funeral. In an arresting shot, we see through the doorway of a ruined structure that Tony is carrying a large cross, leading the funeral cortege partaken by his father's acquaintances. Moments later, a car plunges off the cliff into water. Everyone looks on without a tinge of sympathy and keeps walking. In these sequences the link between the rural and death is clearly conveyed, and at a deeper level, the end of the former times. Slowly, the camera discloses the incongruences between Tony's urban background and the rural surrounding. He distances himself emotionally and physically from the provincial people; his chic outfits and sleek car are completely at odds with the muddy surrounding. If these shots inundated with contrastive elements draws a line of separation, the following key events clearly illustrate the transience of the intended segregation, which also introduce the prologue of Tony's moral journey.

First, Tony reluctantly lets an injured man from that car crash sit inside his expensive car, risking the white leather seat to the stain of blood. In return, the man tells Tony that he is a good man. On the way home, when wiping a spot of dried blood off his seat, he accidentally runs over a black dog on the road. While dragging the dead dog to the wintry and decaying forest, the proper place for the lifeless, the camera gazes at his widening eyes at the horrific sight of a couple of severed hands scattered in the murky puddles of water and bushes. He reports his discovery to the police but then finds himself subject to a Kafkaesque interrogation in a dungeon, where a lunatic sort of police officer accuses him of ‘roaming in the forest with a bad conscience; a forest is filled with litter and rubbish’. His abrupt release is only made possible by the police’s recapture of Nadezhda (Ravshana Kurkova), a Russian-speaking girl who is sought after by the boss of a dubious nightclub, implying an inexplicable connection between the fates of two seemingly disparate individuals, as if Tony’s own escape evokes his responsibility for her. It is shown that Tony helps her escape from the policemen by putting her into his car. This string of events might strike us as senseless or even surreal as many film critics have remarked, but when we look more closely, these shots capture many cases of ‘invasions’ from the outside, fragments of one space pushing into the other and vice versa. For instance, Tony’s space has been ‘invaded’ by the injured man and Nadezhda of the rural space, while he himself invades the dark, forbidden spaces of the forest and the interrogation cell.

The ambiguous and unstable qualities of the boundary become increasingly apparent in the following sequence that takes place in Tony’s home. With a modern exterior, his home is a glass-walled house located on the urban fringe, a desolated area surrounded by dirt roads. It is portrayed as a liminal space between construction and demolition. Yet, inside the house, we seem to find the characteristics of an urban ‘home’ of the educated elite and prosperous middle-class of the centre: a wife who masters ‘the art of living’, a daughter, a group of artist and business friends, wine and delicacies, conversations about the future of business and Western life-style and

pleasure (swinging in the USA). This seemingly self-contained urban zone of comfort in the midst of the dismal rural is however not as solid as we might think. In an intriguing scene, while Tony and his friends are enjoying their meal, a homeless old man suddenly appears behind the glass-wall, staring at them and pointing his finger at a bottle of wine. Everyone, except Tony, looks terrified and starts covering their eyes with hands - 'he'll go away if we're not paying attention. Here the glass-wall both hides and exposes the boundary between the internal (urban) and external (rural) spaces and the people occupying in these spaces. Boundaries depicted in this film mostly bear the imprint of that glass-wall, which is at once transparent and opaque, invisible and visible. The blurring of boundary is also reinforced through the insertions of dreams or nightmares, with a sense of in-betweenness.

These bizarre episodes are followed by a significant transformation on Tony, who steps out of his own space and acts as a translator between urban and rural spaces. His role as a mid-level manager places him in a fitting position to travel back and forth between these spaces and interact with the dwellers in the city and on the outskirts. In this film, the semiotic dialogue is made possible through the common language of compassion. Tony speaks out for the factory workers when his boss instructs him to sack them; he grows attached to the vulnerable Nadezhda, who happens to be the daughter of one of his factory workers whom he has just let go. His guilt is deepened. The rural is depicted as a place offering the potential for redemption.

Tony's search for morality is most evident in the scene at a half-abandoned church. In reply to his question about goodness, the priest confronts him that what he is really seeking is 'a reward for a rightfully lived life', the calculated mindset of a 'common merchant'. At one point, the priest reveals his demonic figure - his eyes turn into spooky black - then, he yells at Tony:

‘Saint Tony, run, little insect. Perhaps you will still succeed in saving your immortal soul. But first, think about this: *The trees are not trees and the houses are not houses.*’

The camera follows Tony, petrified and breathless, running through the woods and ruins for his life. The black dog reincarnates. This is cut to Tony’s bedroom when we catch him awakening. Just when he is about to believe all that was a bad dream, his wife snaps at him about getting rid of the black dog in *her* living room. Outside the house, he is approached by two mysterious workers who insist on building a fence around his house - an order that he did not give. The current set of sequences further crumble the initially established oppositions: god’s and devil’s messengers are personated by one body; trees (forest) and houses (home) symbolise the otherwise; Tony’s home is nothing but a false home in the absence of harmony, sweet tenderness and security. Although Tony’s immediate refusal against the construction of a physical boundary separating his urban space from the rural suggests his determination to remain as the point of contact between two incompatible and conflictual spaces, it simultaneously imparts an impending sense of menace and doom to such an attempt.

In the remaining parts of the narrative, we are offered a glimpse at the co-existence of the urban and the rural in a secret, sinister and otherworldly nightclub with a German name ‘Das Goldene Zeitalter (The Golden Age)’, a place laden with symbolism where the temporal, spatial and cultural expanse of the world - the boss Herr Meister symbolises seven continents and 7000 thousands years and Estonian, Russian, French, German and English are spoken - all seems to be condensed into one. Here the urban and the rural co-exist but this is only possible by the principle of domination and subordination, as the rural inhabitants, including Nadezhda who is recaptured by Herr Meister, are placed onto the stage as zodiac-cabaret girls whom are to be auctioned off, assumedly to be subsequently killed as meals, by the wealthy and privileged under the stage. Although Tony manages to rescue Nadezhda, their escape is short-lived. Soon, Tony is caged, the moment he speaks ‘I love you’ to Nadezhda, he watches her

destroying herself 'by choice' upon Herr Meister's advice. Moments later, he finds himself waking up bounded, naked and his body parts marked with dotted lines and numbers. He makes a narrow escape from dismemberment and wraps himself in an Estonian flag running all the way back home, where he finds the black dog stabbed and bled to death in the now empty house. This is cut to Tony's eyes, which is dissolved into an extended sequence of more than three minutes long in which the camera follows Tony carrying the dead dog as he marches into the snow accompanied by march music. The film closes with a dream-like cannibalistic scene set in an ice rink, where we gaze astonishingly at Tony in his suit devouring the raw flesh of Nadezhda, whom is now placed flat, naked and with her stomach cut wide open, in a fine dining setting.

We might distinguish three major segments in the spatial model within the narrative. The beginning of the film portrays a juxtaposed but disconnected relationship between the urban and the rural, albeit the boundary subsequently is proved to be ambivalent and permeable. Midway through we have come to see the spaces engaging in a series of dialogue as initiated by Tony in his quest for goodness. For a moment, it seems that capitalist and moral values can exist in harmony, that Tony with his access to the prosperous urban is in the capacity to save the deprived in the rural area, and to reach a redemption by doing so. Towards the end of the film, the entrance into the nightclub leads us into a larger semiosphere, where the relationship between the urban and the rural is to be viewed from a historical perspective, through which co-existence of these binaries becomes possible but only within the hierarchy of the former above the latter. Nearer to the end, the symbolic connection between the protagonist and Estonia becomes apparent. Tony wraps himself in the Estonian flag in his struggle against the imminent danger of being dismembered, an evocation of the country's divided past before the restoration of independent statehood in 1991. In this sense, Tony stands as a representative of the country. Through the portrayal of Tony's crossing searching for the possibility of being both 'a merchant' and 'a good person', the film addresses the ambivalent sentiments in the post-Soviet Estonian society in its return to the capitalist West - the social costs of the adoption of capitalist market economy. In this view, the

final image of cannibalism, albeit in an extreme form, acts as a metaphor for the dominating force of capitalism. There has never been a real choice. Unlike Nadezhda, Tony belongs to the urban space. To survive, he can only embrace the rules of capitalism.

CHAPTER IV - A NATION'S DIALOGUE OF CINEMATIC URBAN AND RURAL SPACES

4.1 Among the Contemporary Filmic Crossings

Following the crossings of the protagonists, the cinematic voyage in the previous chapter has provoked a kaleidoscope impression of the Estonian landscape on the screen: patches of the city, swaths of the countryside and strokes of the road. These images, grounded in the Estonian geographic landscape, might appear to be the natural companion to the narratives set in Estonia. However, as Emma Widdis points out, 'film offer[s] not just views of the territory, but ways of looking at it (and living it), and defined particular relationships with the territory' (Widdis 2010, p. 81). This returns us to the earlier discussion on the fine distinction between 'landscape' and 'setting' in film. Apparently, in this specific corpus of films, the filmmakers consciously represent particular 'views of territory' (the juxtaposition of urban and rural spaces in contemporary Estonia and the foregrounding of rural spaces) and the use of the road motif narrating city-dweller protagonist(s)' journeys into the rural. A narrative of the journey undertaken by a rural-dweller protagonist into the city would probably offer us a very different picture.

Lotman's model allows us to register a broader spectrum of similarities and differences in the use of cinematic landscape (particularly, the rural spaces) and road motif within these films, and to explore an array of artistic intentions behind these strategies in the negotiation of post-Soviet Estonian national identity. It is also significant to note that, within the road motif, the cinematic representation of landscape is not independent of, but in tandem with the moving protagonists, as such, the ways of looking at the landscape are not fixed but in interaction with the protagonist(s), engaging in a process of mutual restructuring. In many cases, these are initially informed by the status of the main protagonists in the city and their respective perceptions of the landscape, which is primarily the rural in this context, at the

departure point of their journeys, and their reasons for undertaking the journeys. Taken together, we have come to see these rather similar journeys narrated in the films in terms of that of chance, of self-discovery and of spirituality, each with its own exploration into various transformative dimensions with regard to the urban-rural spaces, individual and national traverses.

Initially, the use of the road motif in these films seems to suggest the (re)discovery of identity through a reconnection between the urban protagonists and the rural roots. The national dimension of these individuals' identity quests is manifested in the explicit and implicit references to the country in films and, particularly salient in the association between rural spaces and a host of core constituents of Estonian traditional national identity, in the form of folk-tale, traditional values, national historical past, spirituality and goodness. Yet, the film analysis has revealed that these films portray the creation of new ties, rather than a reconnection, between the urban and the rural, as a pre-existing link presupposed by the latter is absent in the narratives. Right from the beginning, without exception, all of the protagonists are provided with the justification for their seemingly unusual entrance into and presence in the rural such as seeking a shelter from a storm, a new home or a job position or attending his father's funeral. This is interestingly reflected in *Mindless*, when the protagonist tells his wife about 'taking a gap year off' - a more socially acceptable idea to the urbanites - instead of his genuine but 'insane' thought of looking for his old self and meanings of life in the forest. The very need for these various reasons has eloquently pointed out the existing rift between urban and rural spaces in the Estonian context nowadays. Also, the two spaces are often portrayed as two discrete units at the outset, which only come into contact and dialogue through the protagonists' journeys. For most of the city-dwellers protagonists/characters, the rural appears as an unfamiliar terrain of which they do not know what to expect, whereas the rural-dwellers are often portrayed as immobile characters, isolated and entrapped in the rural. In the absence of a pre-existing link, it would be more accurate to say that these films employ the motif of the road to forge new links between the urban and the rural.

Through their spatial traverse in the border-spaces, the city-dweller protagonists play the important role of a 'liaison' with the seemingly disparate and antithetical urban and rural spaces; however, their presence notwithstanding, these films do not seek to project a viable or a sustainable link between the urban and the rural. Rather, it is argued that, in spite of individual differences in terms of the aspect and extent of urban-rural tensions and divergencies, these five films share a similar representation of the rural landscape as a transitory, temporary or disillusioned space, in the form of 'a passing' or 'a transit' or 'a dead-end', where none of the protagonists can stay or settle in.

In *The Highway Crossing*, the rural constitutes a chance, an alternative path to the protagonists. The ending of the film depicts all the characters returning to where they started, suggesting the chance is a disillusionment. The film concludes with the depiction of the rural as a space where an alternative 'reality' is played out, seemingly independent of the contemporary reality. Here the rural is treated as a 'passing'. In *Made in Estonia*, rural space is perceived as inferior to the urban space initially but it holds the potential for enrichment. It is constructed as the site of unrealised potential, where a third way (as symbolised by Väino's success into a wealthy and famous man) between the country's traditional values and contemporary values based on the West can be found. Likewise, *186 Kilometers* begins with a depiction of the rural in an inferior light and in association with traditions, particularly the country's historical past. Here the rural represents not one particular kind but a myriad of ways of living and values that seems to offer alternatives to Jan's previous career as a commercial comedian. But Jan's series of escape from these rural places indicate that the rural holds no solutions to the present path. In both films of the 'Road from Zero', although the rural provides an opportunity for self-discovery, it is not seen as a final destination, but instead a 'transit', a transitional space before the two protagonists move on to the next stop. For Väino, it is a grand villa in an unidentified place, while for Jan it is the 'cultural capital' - Tartu - as he is after all an 'Artist' who does not belong to the woods. The relationship between the urban and the rural is more complicated in *Mindless* and *The Temptation of St. Tony*.

The rural spaces in these two films appear to be both materially inferior and symbolically superior and bear closer links with the transformation undergone by the rural as a result of the socio-economic transition in post-Soviet Estonia. *Mindless* shows three faces of the rural spaces. The romanticised version of rural as a moral land in the mind of Toomas is contrasted with, and ultimately replaced by, an acknowledgement of the reality of the altered rural environment in Estonia today. The rural no longer remains as a privileged spiritual place insulated from the influences of capitalist free-market economy. In a similar tone, *The Temptation of St. Tony* constructs a dilapidated rural milieu wherein lie the redemptive possibilities for Tony to save his own soul of a merchant by saving Nadezhda. But the concluding death scene has devastated the last hope. In the capitalist world, there is no mercy for the vulnerable or the compassionate. The two films of the 'Road to Zero' share the image of the rural as a 'dead-end'.

Among these juxtaposing elements of the urban and the rural, these films have in common an marked absence of a depiction of a unified traditional Estonian identity rooted or preserved in the rural, and an imagery of heightened incongruences between the traditional and the modern, the past and the contemporary. On the one hand, the films represent the rural spaces in association with jumbled references to various traditional aspects of Estonian national identity as mentioned earlier; on the other hand, these nostalgic elements are undercut by the coupling of the rural spaces with fragmented glimpses of a range of existent undesirable or detrimental consequences, often in a semi-stylised manner, arising from the country's transition into a neo-liberal market economy and its increasing alignment with the West. The changes of the macro-level transformations such as rural deprivation, cult of money, commercialisation, commodification and individualism on both physical rural environment and the lives and mentality of inhabitants living there are shown. From this perspective, the rural is seen as fraught with the impacts of the larger process of restructuring and transition, with the urban as the centre of the forces. In this interplay of quasi-idealised visions and semi-realistic snapshots of the rural landscape in the films, the focus has been shifted towards the transformation of the protagonists, exploring their psychological context in

search of personal identity and their own paths while traversing in these disorientating spaces.

In their crossings through these border-spaces, we witness the internal struggles of the protagonists - the ambivalence and anxiety arise in the process of self-discovery, self-realisation and reckoning of the reality - which acquire a physicality through 'double character', '*alter ego*' and 'inner voices' (conversation with fairy, guardian angel, etc.) in these works. Intriguingly, these films disclose in the ending that these protagonists have neither abandoned their ties with the urban/centre nor completely stepped outside of the cultural norms and values dominant in the urban spaces; instead, the films show the city-dwellers protagonists make the act of reintegrating themselves with the urban reality and dominant values of the city as their *own choices*, resulted from their transformation in the course of the crossing from a passive self (a follower; defined by the others) into an awoken self (displaying one's own point of view). It is argued that the films under discussion use the portrayals of the protagonists' journeys to signify a reinforcement of the tie with the contemporary urban, instead of a reconnection with the rural root.

Through the physical and introspective crossings of the protagonists within the national territory, contemporary Estonian filmmakers in question do not seek to recreate the foregrounded rural landscape into a pure symbol of national continuity, or to represent it as an accurate reflection of the post-Soviet reality. Rather, they turn it into a liminal space that allows the protagonists a contemplative pause to rethink their previous paths in search of their own identities. With the depiction of the rural space in a state of '*a passing*' or '*a transit*' or '*a dead-end*', these filmmakers articulate in their films a redefined relationship of the national territory, challenging in particular the notion of the rural as the 'preferred national space' central to the expression of Estonian national identity, thereby expressing a more realistic tone than a yearning for a nostalgic and romanticised return to the country's historical past and former values. By simultaneously exposing the socio-economic problems emerged from the post-Soviet

restructuring and portraying a renewed tie of the city-dweller protagonists with the urban in the films, these contemporary filmmakers reveal a sense of ambivalence towards national transitional trajectory, focusing their critique on the process - an uncritical approach - than the goal in their reappraisal of Estonia's transition towards the West. Through the motif of the road, these films engage in a re-thinking of Estonia's 'rural identity' and 'urban identity' in the post-Soviet context (Unwin 1999), emphasising the search for national identity as an on-going process of negotiation structured through the country's past and present.

4.2 Between Past and Present Representations

This part seeks to provide a broader framework looking at the continuity and shift in the filmmakers' vision and manipulation of the urban and rural spaces in the Soviet-/ Estonian cinema. The comparison will be centred on two periods where the use of landscape in relation to national identity is especially pronounced: the 1960s (based on Eva Näripea's studies), a period witnessing the emergence of 'national school' spearheaded by a young generation of ethnic Estonian filmmakers, and the late 1970s to early 1980s (based on my reading of Sulev Nõmmik's *Here We Are!* (1979) and Peeter Simm's *The Ideal Landscape* (1980)), a period notable for some of the best-known films set in the rural made in the late Soviet era.¹⁶ Given the scope of this dissertation, this part does not aim to render a detailed textual analysis but rather to offer a sketch of the representations of landscape in these predecessors' works, highlighting major features of each period for comparison.

As previously mentioned in Chapter I, Näripea argues that spatial representations of Soviet Estonian cinema in 1960s reflect significant points of departure between the Moscow-appointed 'visiting filmmakers' and the recently graduated ethnic Estonian filmmakers; while the aesthetics of the former is characterised by 'the notions of the

¹⁶ According to Eva Näripea, Soviet Estonian films of the 1970s were predominantly set in the urban but the latter years of the decade witnessed the resurgence of interest in rural milieus, which was in part attributed by the advent of Estonian 'new wave' in 1977 (Näripea 2011, p. 217).

“tourist gaze”, the conquest of territory, binary spatial patterns (above all, centre versus periphery), and closed and static “sacralised” space’ (Näripea 2011, p. 41), that of the latter is best described by the preference for rural milieu over urban milieu, the retreat from contemporary Soviet reality into earlier pre-war era based on Estonian literary classics and the drift from socialist realist spirit towards subjectivity, memory and intimacy (ibid.). Although, as also noted by Näripea, the changes in the cinematic representations of landscape are part of the wider phenomenon of the Thaw period of which Emma Widdis describes as the ‘liberation of landscape’ (Widdis 2010, p. 80), the return of force and power to nature, there is a recognisable Estonian specificity in these shifts, reflecting the subversiveness of the new local talents, albeit in a way more subtle than overt, in negotiating national identity through the portrayal of national landscape.

The retrospective visions of these young native Estonian filmmakers depict the rural landscape in past tense and in isolation. By fixing the link between filmic rural landscape to the pre-war ‘golden age’ and, by extension, the associated way of life, values, traditions and lost independent statehood (Näripea 2011), the filmic rural landscape of the 1960s is characterised by the representation of a temporally and spatially unified space, alternatively, a *chronotope* (space-time) of its own as proposed by Näripea (ibid.). On closer inspection, the rural is represented as explicitly bygone but implicitly eternal, and as overtly detached from the urban but covertly in replacement of the urban. The quiet subversion of the early filmmakers is thereby found in the very tension that lies between the ‘screened’ and the ‘un-screened’, between the artistic choice of creative minds and the official formulas buttressed by the Soviet ideologies.

Made in a later period of Soviet era, *Here We Are!* and *The Ideal Landscape* share the same interest of the films of 1960s in looking out to the countryside in search of the ‘national space’, yet they distinguish themselves with the depicted encounters and conflicts between the urban and the rural. We find in the films a road motif akin to the contemporary one discussed, that narrates the unexpected and incongruent presence of urban-dwellers in the rural: *Here We Are!* depicts the holiday break of a ridiculous

middle-aged couple and a beautiful but superficial young lady characterised by the stereotyped ‘money-rules-Tallinn-mentality’, while *The Ideal Landscape* shows the rural life of a young man appointed by the Young Communist League to oversee the spring sowing in a collective farm in the early 1950s. Yet, it is important to note that in these two films only the rural milieu is captured, and that the urban protagonists are not the sole protagonists, whom are weighed more or less equally to other rural-dweller protagonists.

In *Here We Are!*, the rural landscape is unambiguously pictured as pastoral, idyllic and fertile. The opening documentary-like footage shows content and stress-free rural inhabitants engaging in various everyday activities, glorifying the man-nature harmony. The story-line is simple: the ‘holiday-makers’ from the capital Tallinn find accommodation in a farm house, whose spontaneous visit to the rural is portrayed as ‘an intrusion’ to the tranquility of the country life, imposing the money-oriented mentality of the capital on the rural inhabitants, which is succinctly captured by the character’s signature phrase of ‘We are from Tallinn. We pay’, which remains well-known in today Estonia. The disturbance of the urban force is also reflected in the infatuation of the farmer, the father of the rural family, with the beautiful city girl. The film ends with the abrupt departure of the urban visitors and the joyful engagement of the farmer’s daughter, implying that the rural is, above all, a landscape of homeland, memories, lasting happiness and new hopes. The depiction of the urban characters - dominating but transient, overbearing but mocked - is not to suggest any real threats to the rural space and inhabitants, on the contrary, their absurdity and harmlessness is co-opted to signify the rural space as a site of continuity, endurance and vitality.

A key scene in beginning of *The Ideal Landscape* takes place in the room of the young protagonist of the Young Communist League when he just settles in the collective farm, in which he looks at an illustrative map of the Soviet countryside hung on the wall. With a repeated appearance in the film, the map is first shown slightly from afar, allowing the viewer to spot out symbols of socialist industrial achievement amidst

the open nature - an operating train, endless tracks, ships, harbours, factories, smoking chimneys, bridges, machinery on the collective farm. The nature here is captured as a backdrop testifying to its subordination to the socialist force and will. Half way through the film, the map reappears in close-up, as the camera lingers on its small details, we discover the trees, streams, waterfalls, windmills, patches of fields and huts. The nature is revived with its own rhythm, character and liveliness.

This shifting perception of nature echoes the narrative of the opposition and battle between the intervention of the Soviet agricultural production system, as symbolised by the young deputy whose task is to mobilise the local farmers to sow according to the standardised State-planned schedule, and the law of nature and the local (native) wisdom and voice, as symbolised by the leader of the collective farm who unites the farmers to sow according to the nature's cycle. The outcome is the transformation of the young deputy, embarrassed by the villagers for the lack of life experience and unfamiliarity with the nature, albeit not severely ridiculed as the case with the city characters in *Here We Are!*, who has come to the realisation that the ideal landscape emerges from an intrinsic identification with the nature, rather than manufactured by a meticulous execution of the official directive. The lived rural space is contrasted with the Soviet-envisioned landscape encapsulated in the image of the map. A scene from the final sequence narrating the village leader's speech to the children at the school graduation ceremony reinforces the close link of the countryside with the notions of homeland and parenthood.

Here We Are! is a direct caricature of the contemporary reality, while *The Ideal Landscape* speaks to the contemporary condition through a fictional event set in an earlier Soviet period. Filmmakers of both films address the issue of national identity not merely by choosing and representing the rural spaces in films, or by resorting to a 'nostalgic, escapist atmosphere' (Näripea 2011, p. 13) that permeates in the films of the 1960s. Rather, they take a step further by narrating the ultimate triumph of the rural (native Estonian) perspective over the urban (Sovietised) perspective. This is conveyed

through the interaction of characters of respective spaces. By way of mockery, *Here We Are!* exposes and challenges the Soviet-engendered political and economic dominance of urban centre (tourists from Tallinn) over rural periphery (island villagers). Similarly, *The Ideal Landscape* questions the authority and control of the Soviet-organs from the city (the young-deputy) over native rural farmlands (the farm leader). It is within these competing perspectives that the real tension arises, unmasking the filmmakers' critique and signs of resistance against the Soviet immediate realities.

Based on the investigation of the major features of the early representations of rural landscape in two periods of the Soviet era, it becomes clear that although contemporary Estonian filmmakers follow the footsteps of their predecessors in looking to the (rural) landscape in the interrogation of national identity in times of transition and change, they display a distinctive manifestation by reinterpreting and reinventing the cinematic rendering of the theme and define the relationship between cinematic urban-rural landscape and Estonian national identity in new terms.

If filmmakers of the 1960s are said to be engaged with the issue of national identity most saliently through the choice of a particular filmic space (the preference for past rural spaces over contemporary Sovietised rural and urban spaces), and the filmmakers of *Here We Are!* and *The Ideal Landscape* through the choice of a foregrounded point of view (the triumph of the rural protagonists' perspective and values over those of the urban protagonists'), then, one of the most prominent features distinguishing these contemporary filmmakers from their predecessors lies in their *dual choice* of space (the crossover of urban and (foregrounded) rural spaces) and point of view (the emphasis on urban protagonists' perspectives). It is through the increasingly complex and dynamic form of urban-rural (spatial and non-spatial) tensions produced by this combined strategy that filmmakers in question articulate their cinematic conceptualisation of contemporary Estonian national identity.

Another distinction found in these recent works is a redefinition of the respective relationships between filmic urban and rural landscape with Estonian national identity. Regarding the rural, while early films represent it as a place of nostalgia, romanticised purity and subjectivity that conjures up the country's historical origins, national values and ideals, cultural authenticity, personal and collective memories, contemporary films analysed have evidently rendered it in a far less positive tone and intimate light, giving it a contradictory character. As discussed, the rural landscape in this corpus of films is characterised by a juxtaposition of quasi-idealised visions and semi-realistic depictions of the recent developments and problems in the region, therefore, it is instilled with both emotive and nostalgic quality and a certain degree of materiality. It is further contrasted by the co-existence of urban-rural spaces captured by the camera. Shown as de-familiarised and fragmentised, the rural is deprived of the image as a sign of continuity and a carrier of national identity. While for the urban, there is a tendency among earlier films to reserve the negative light for its representation on screen. In the 1960s, while filmmakers in most cases found retreat in the rural milieu, in others, tended to show 'the city as a place of (ideological and/or personal) corruption' (Näripea 2011, p. 69). To the same effect, the two analysed films of 1979 and 1980 pose the urbanites as the object of ridicule. Yet, these characters are presented as harmless in themselves; it is the larger Soviet ideological forces to which they are subjected that forms the real target of criticism. In today's renditions, the rural appears to be less innocent in film, the urban less unwelcome. As argued, contemporary filmmakers attempt to reaffirm the link between city-dweller protagonists and contemporary urban spaces, in this way, they demonstrate a marked divergence from earlier filmmakers in their interpretations of the role of urban and rural spaces in shaping Estonian national identity in the post-Soviet context.

Furthermore, the shift of focus in the forces forging Estonian national identity also reflects another aspect of the reworking of this cinematic tradition. Earlier Estonian filmmakers (re)create in their works a sense of Estonianness primarily based on the 'Us (Estonian) - Others (Soviet)' opposition. We recall Näripea's notions of the 'nation-

scape' and 'Soviet-scape' that elucidate the conscious attempts of the native Estonian filmmakers of 1960s to investigate Estonian 'national' identity through a disassociation from the Soviet 'visiting filmmakers' (Näripea 2011). *Here We Are!* and *The Ideal Landscape* also display a clear intention to undermine cinematically the dominance of the Soviet power over Estonian rural landscape. It can be argued that, filmmakers of both eras sought to rid the cinematic representations of Estonian (rural) landscape of the Soviet ideological control. Among the five contemporary films examined, we observe a different type of 'Us-Others' opposition based on which the filmmakers conceptualise the Estonian identity in the post-Soviet context. The protagonists' crossings figured so prominently in these films represent a traverse into the country's past and present in the form of rural and urban spaces. Their crossings belong to an inward search, negotiating between 'old self - new self'. Through the interweaving of personal and national trajectories, contemporary Estonian filmmakers of this specific corpus of films probe into Estonia's national development, more pointedly, recent changes in economic, social and cultural aspects during post-Soviet transition in their cinematic re-imagining of a new modern form of 'Estonianness'.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has demonstrated that the exploration of national identity through the urban-rural spaces found in this specific corpus of contemporary Estonian films has echoes in wider Estonian historical, folkloristic and cinematic contexts, particularly, in the works of the predecessors of Estonian cinema. The continuation of the theme notwithstanding, the analysis of the spatial model and the use of motif of the road within these films has stressed the subtle differences in these filmmakers' individual critique on various aspects of Estonia's search for new identity and the national transitional trajectories, and the distinctive manifestation of these contemporary renditions as a whole, illustrating the reinterpretation and reinvention of contemporary Estonian filmmakers under discussion.

The application of Lotman's semiotics of culture in film analysis has illustrates two major insights offered by his notion of 'semiosphere' and 'boundary'. First, from the perspective of Lotmanian semiosphere, the urban-rural antithesis is viewed in terms of mutual dependence than in isolation, thus the two spaces can be seen as points of tension *and* contrast, a precondition for the interaction. In this way, the urban-rural binary opposition needs not to be discarded but incorporated into the reading of the films. Second, for Lotman, the existence of boundaries between urban and rural spaces implies a process of interaction, the films are perceived as transacted by the crisscross of spatial and non-spatial boundaries, which permits us to have a more nuanced reading of the structure and dynamics within the representations of urban and rural spaces in the films, and register the relevance between the protagonists' traverses and the national trajectory of contemporary Estonia.

By contextualising the spatial representation of a relatively recent post-Soviet period within a larger temporal framework, this study has sought to stress the connection between cinematic landscape and national identity within the specific Estonian context, through which the artistic agendas of the filmmakers discussed

become discernible. By charting historical shifts in the cinematic rendering of the theme, it has shed light on how cinematic landscape is spatially and temporally shaped, responsive to and in engagement with the immediate reality and subjects. Due to the scope of this present work, the focus is placed on the five films that narrate and foreground the crossings undertaken by native Estonian protagonists. An exploration into other post-Soviet Estonian films depicting the journeys undertaken by foreigner protagonists in/to Estonia or by the Estonian protagonists abroad might offer research potential, generating interesting perspectives to the negotiation of contemporary Estonian national identity in cinema.

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