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Eva Toulouze
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Estonia has a long history of relations with Siberia. In the last decades of the 19th century, Siberia represented for Estonian peasants, a kind of mythical Eldorado, where they could go in search of free land and a better life: that's how there are still nowadays Estonian-speaking villages in Siberia. From voluntary to forced exile – later on, Siberia is connected with Estonia's history most tragic pages, with two massive deportations during the first years of Soviet occupation. This is the experience of the senior author of documentary films about Siberia, Lennart Meri[1], who was deported to this area with all his family in 1941.

May we find in this historical evocation the reasons explaining why so many Estonian filmmakers have been fascinated by Siberia? There is certainly a third, deeper reason to add to the abovementioned connections. Peoples who are surrounded by nations speaking very different languages see their own idiom as a stronger factor defining identity. This is also true for Estonians, who share with Finns many similarities, but are thoroughly aware of their peculiarities in comparison with Russian or the Baltic languages. Since the late 18th century, linguists have connected Estonian with the Finno-Ugric language group, which consists of Finnish, Hungarian, Estonian and other minority languages spoken in North-Western, Central and North-Eastern Russia as well as in Siberia. The Samoyed languages, spoken in European Russia's and Siberia's arctic areas, are also connected, although more distantly, with the language group Estonian belongs to. Except between Finnish and Estonian, which are as close (and as different) as Portuguese and Spanish, the relation between the other languages is clear only to linguists, through reconstruction, and does not in any means infer that there is any actual genetic kinship between the peoples speaking those language. But beyond the dryness of scientific approaches, myth appeals to imagination. Estonians have been fascinated by these remote kin and have been looking for them with eagerness and curiosity. This explains why anthropologists and filmmakers, while attracted by Siberia, concentrated fairly exclusively on Western Siberia[2], on the so-called Ob-Ugrian peoples (the Mansi and the Khanty), as well as the Samoyed peoples (the Tundra Nenets, the Forest Nenets and the Nganassan). From this point of view, it is perhaps not by mere chance that their attention has been much focused on the Khanty, who are more numerous and have preserved stronger peculiar features and national identity than most of the earlier sedentarised Mansi.

[1] Lennart Meri is born in 1929. He studied History in Tartu, but worked in different artistic fields (theatre, cinema, and media) and wrote numerous books many of them based on his travels within the Soviet Union. In the 1970-ies, he made for Tallinnfilm several films about Finno-Ugric peoples that were treated as problematic in his country but were recognised abroad. Still, Lennart Meri is better known abroad for his political career: after Estonia recovered its independence in 1992, he won the first presidential elections in 1992 and was re-elected in 1996. His achievements as President of Estonia have been highly recognised in the country and abroad.

[2] The few exceptions are Arvo Iho whose film „The Chronicle of Sireniki", made in 1991, shows the life of an Eskimo village on the coasts of Tchukotka, the extreme far East of Siberia ; and Aado Lintrop, who filmed shamans in other Siberia regions.

Estonian filmmakers from the elder generation have looked for original myths and attempted to reconstruct the links and to recreate, often with great talent and persuasion, a common mythology. From this point of view, Lennart Meri's work as a filmmaker is not to be dissociated from his production as a writer. It is the myth he is looking for: in his novels, whose rough material comprehends both data from scientific research and elements of its mythical elaboration intermingled with fiction, he builds a bridge between the achievements of linguists and the simple people's understanding of kinship. In his films, he turns towards the roots, i.e. Western Siberia peoples' traditional rites, which were still living or had not been completely forgotten. His most famous film, "The Sons of Toorum" (1989 p.), has been shot in a village of the taiga, where local people, after long years, performed one of their most peculiar rites, the bear's feast, commemorating the killing of a bear. This ethnographic approach hided a deeper political message, which was at that time mostly Estonian-oriented: the stress on traditional worldview, on language kinship and on kinship *tout court*, were ideas able to arouse in Estonians consciousness of their roots and to strengthen their national awareness, while they lived under Soviet rule, which intended to merge all the people's and the individuals into one single, Soviet culture. Kinship is the first idea emphasised in Toorum's sons opening sentence, and colonial rule is also discreetly present. In some ways Lennart Meri is the "father" of the main following directions in which Estonian documentary filmmaking about Siberia developed: the political and the ethnographic orientations.

Lennart Meri is the only filmmaker whose production started in the deepest Soviet period. His younger colleagues worked and are working in very different conditions. Their interest for the Finno-Ugrians subsisted, but there was no more need to "use" them for internal scopes. Even before formal independence, at the end of the eighties, the political orientation of their films was partly reoriented: having recovered freedom, Estonians felt new responsibilities towards those who still lived under colonial rule. Many, if not all the films produced after 1991, focus on Siberia's indigenous peoples present situation, revealing the problems they are facing as ethnic groups and asserting, more or less explicitly, their right to live in the way they would themselves chose. Social protest was not absent from Lennart Meri's films, but, at the beginning of the 1990-ies, the context is more favourable to its expression: Western Siberia peoples' were starting to protest themselves against the way oil drilling was destroying their environment and affecting their chances to survive even physically. Estonian filmmakers tried to assist them in their fight both by their productions and by their presence. Valentin Kuik[3] expressed their anguish in "Letter to the President" (1990) and focused, in "Flight" (1995) (p.), upon one of the most controversial problems in the life of indigenous peoples: the integration of native children into educational system, considered for a long time as one of the achievements of the Soviet regime, started to be seen and presented from the other point of view, the perception of native families split, of children forcedly taken from their natural protective environment and sent to school in order to be russified. Valentin Kuik does not tell us what to think: he just follows with a most sensitive camera the children been taken school by the helicopter. Another famous Estonian filmmaker, Mark Soosaar[4], participated actively and contributed, with the local

[3] Valentin Kuik is born in 1943. He is both a documentary and fiction filmmaker and a recognised writer.

[4] Mark Soosaar is born in 1946. He is known mainly as a documentary filmmaker (he has made more than 15 films) and a teacher in filmmaking. With Lennart Meri, at the very beginning, he founded in 1987 in Pärnu an

association of indigenous peoples “Spasenye Yugry”, to organise events whose aim was to make known their tragic situation to the world. Anzori Barkalaja[5], in his research about Khantys, was mostly interested in survival strategies: ethnographic interest for traditional values and concern for the peoples’ fate are intermingled in different films he shot with the assistance of Veiko Taluste (“The Khanty of the Pim River” 1999) and of Aado Lintrop[6] (“The shaman’s drum” 1994).

The purer ethnographic tradition still subsisted and is represented by Aado Lintrop’s discreet but solid activity: although at the beginning of the 1990-ies he kept in touch with the political developments in Western Siberia, his films focus mostly the Native’s vanishing religious traditions. Like Lennart Meri, he recorded, but on a larger scale, a bear’s feast organised by the Association of Indigenous peoples, whose aim was to reconcile the peoples with their traditions and to revive disappearing heritage. Aado Lintrop is also the one who looked for shamans in other areas than the Ob basin: in the Extreme North-East of Western Siberia, the Taymyr peninsula, by the Nganassan (1977), as well as in other Siberia areas. Closer to the 21st century, Liivo Niglas[7]’ first film, “Brigade” (2000) only mentions as a background the political context: it is entirely focused on revealing Nenets nomadic reindeer-herders everyday life in a delicate period of their yearly cycle, the calving period. Unlike most of his predecessors, Liivo Niglas’ work was based on long fieldwork made in the same brigade for several years.

Still, both in the political and ethnographic directions, the second half of the nineties brought the appearance of the individual on the filmic arena: community life is oftener and oftener shown through his members’ individual profile. These films may be called “portrait” films, but, although they are focused on individuals and their single personalities, they go far beyond: through the persons, they present in a more human, emotional, directly intelligible way the fate of the communities their “heroes” belong to. I would mention some of such films. In “Voices” (1996), Valentin Kuik concentrates on one period of Eremey Aipin’s life: Eremey is a Khanty writer who was elected at the last Supreme Soviet and at the first State Duma, and attempted to fight for Western Siberia’s peoples rights from the legislative point of view, at the State level. Valentin Kuik happened to follow Eremey Aipin during his third electoral campaign, which led to a failure, for Aipin discovered the day of the vote that his candidature had been invalidated at the last moment. Mark Soosaar has been long concerned with Siberia’s peoples and they appear in several films. In “Grandma of boats” (1993), Soosaar presents in parallel the more or less sacred process of making canoes by a Native American, a Khanty and an Estonian masters. But his main film about Western Siberia is undoubtedly “Father, Son and Holy Torum”

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annual Festival called International Documentary Film Festival, which he has been directing for more than a decade. More information is available on his Internet homepage http://www.chaplin.ee/mark/.

[5] Anzori Barkalaja is born in 1968. He started making fieldwork in Siberia in 1991 and he defended a PhD in Folklore in 2002 about Khanty Shamanism. At the Moment, Barkalaja is the Rector of the Academy of Culture in Viljandi. The importance of Siberia for hi mis well to be appreciated on his unfinished homepage www.folklore.ee/~anzori/.

[6] Aado Lintrop is a folklorist specialist of shamanism and traditional beliefs. He defended in 2000 a PhD thesis about Udmurt folk religion. He is author of numerous films made during his fieldwork in Siberia and in the Volga region. At the moment, he works in the Estonians Folklore Archives. An important part of his research is available on the Internet http://haldjas.folklore.ee/~aado/eestin.htm.

[7] Liivo Niglas is born in 1970. He is an ethnologist teaching at the chair of Ethnology in Tartu University (MA in 1999 with a thesis about Reindeer in the Nenets’ worldview) and at the same time a documentary filmmaker.

(1997). Soosaar concentrates on a peculiar family: the father and the mother live a traditional may of life in the taiga, while their son is in charge of ethnic relations in an oil company. In this tale built on true material, Soosaar achieves in a provocative way several goals: he shows industrial as well as traditional life, the schizophrenic identity of younger generations, the individuals with their human weaknesses and the tragic situation they are caught in. Liivo Niglas' "Yuri Vella's world" (2002) is also concentrated on one individual, the impressing Forest Nenets intellectual Yuri Vella. Unlike Soosaar's films, where storytelling is a central tool, there is no actual story in this film: perhaps the most event-like moment is where Yuri Vella discovers that Russia's president reindeer's newborn baby had not survived the sudden cold, announcing bad days for Russia… As the film reveals, Vella has a clear vision of his land's future and he tries to answer the challenge: with Niglas' camera, we follow Yuri's way of thinking, which incorporates all his knowledge about "Western" world – Yuri has graduated from Moscow Literary Institute - and his own, traditional worldview. The most recent film, which represents the ethnographic trend, is Janno Simm[8]'s "Autumn on Ob River" (2003). It gives an overview of the different activities of the Ob Khantys – fishing, reindeer breeding, hunting different animals – by following one single family at different moments of its husbandry cycle.

In Estonian documentary filmmaking, Siberia occupies thus a most particular place: while the overwhelming majority of Estonian documentaries are naturally centred on Estonia, the only films connected with other countries are those Estonian filmmakers shot about other Finno-Ugric peoples – mostly Siberian indigenous peoples. The festival presents a representative overview of this trend.

[8] Janno Simm on töötanud Eesti Rahva Muuseumi filmiosakonnana ja õpib visuaalste antropoloogiat Tromsö ülikoolis.