

THE ESTONIAN DOCUMENTARY FILM INDUSTRY: INVESTING IN THE CULTURAL GROWTH OF THE COUNTRY

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Abstract

Estonia represents one of the few countries in Europe where short and feature documentaries are produced more than fiction films. According to the latest report published by *Cineuropa* in 2015, Estonia released 8 fiction features and 12 documentaries. Alongside these, 44 fiction short films, 85 short documentaries and 10 short animations were completed, making a total of 159 films produced in Estonia during 2014. Though it has a limited domestic market, Estonian documentary film industry is vibrant and flourishing. Is it possible for this trend to continue as the country faces demographic decline and competes with bigger industries?

The potential of Estonian authors and producers is very high and could be increased. There is a spirit of taking the initiative and good business conditions. Though Estonia does not have huge budgets and public grants that bigger European countries possess, it does have the right qualified workforce. My presentation will illustrate the main trends of the Estonian film industry, with a focus on documentary sector, and suggest a concrete solution to maximize productivity and create a number of inspiring works for international audience. The excellent level of Estonia's educational system and its professionals – especially as concerns primary education – may be combined with the outstanding work of filmmakers, producing documentaries for educational purposes and favouring interactivity, and done jointly with IT experts, among the best in Europe.

Keywords: *documentary, film, education, IT, interactivity.*

The Estonian film industry is one of the youngest in Europe, but also one of the most promising. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the first dark

years as an independent country – the industry reached its lowest point in 1996, releasing only two documentary films – Estonia has started to carefully looking for its own national identity, promoting economic innovation and increasing the public expenditure aimed to deliver cultural products, such as documentaries and fictional films.

Over the last 25 years, the local industry has significantly evolved. In order to understand the main trends of this market, however, it is fundamental to have a look at some specific figures. According to the latest report published by *Cineuropa* in May 2015, for instance, Estonia recently released 8 fiction features and 12 documentaries [Boyce, 2015]. Alongside these, 44 fiction short films, 85 short documentaries and 10 short animations were completed, making a total of 159 films produced in Estonia during 2014. This is a very good result in a country which is suffering from the effects of demographic decline, counting the residing population of just 1,315,944 inhabitants (figure 1). Furthermore, the figures published by *Cineuropa* underline a unique feature of the local industry. Estonia, indeed, represents one of the few countries in Europe where short and feature documentaries are produced more than fiction films (61% of the film production in 2014).

Population, 1 January, years

4 May 2016

	Males and females	Males	Females
2007	1 342 920	624 260	718 660
2008	1 338 440	622 050	716 390
2009	1 335 740	621 320	714 420
2010	1 333 290	620 800	712 490
2011	1 329 660	619 700	709 960
2012	1 325 217	618 138	707 079
2013	1 320 174	616 167	704 007
2014	1 315 819	614 919	700 900
2015	1 313 271	614 369	698 882
2016	1 315 944	616 708	699 236

Figure 1. Stat.ee (Estonian National Institute of Statistics) – Estonian population 2007–2016 (<http://www.stat.ee/34277>)

On the other hand, also statistics about cinema-going is very encouraging: 2,600,000 spectators attended cinema in 2014 and in 2015 the number increased to 3,093,281 [Boyce, 2016]. These are recorded as the highest attendance rates since the independence. Indeed, Estonians perceive cinema as a significant leisure activity, spending 27% of their budget on watching films and documentaries in 2014.



Figure 2. 2015 *Cineuropa* Report –
The year in numbers

The domestic market is also growing (+11.33% in 2015, figure 2) and an increasing number of Estonian films are becoming popular abroad, receiving several prestigious awards and participating in international film festivals. The same *Cineuropa* report shows the following films as major successes of the 2014–2015 season:

- *1944*, directed by Elmo Nüganen, 2015 – 115,559 viewers;
- *The Secret Society of Soutptown*, directed by Margus Paju, 2015 – 90,746 viewers;
- *Ghost Mountaineer*, directed by Urmas Eero Liiv, 2015 – 50,000 viewers;
- *Nullpunkt*, directed by Mihkel Ulk, 2014 – 43,000 viewers;
- *The Fencer*, directed by Klaus Härö, 2015 – 40,000 viewers;
- *Cherry Tobacco*, directed by Katrin and Andres Maimik, 2014 – 20,000 viewers;
- *In the Crosswind*, directed by Martti Helde, 2014 – 18,000 viewers.

All these statistics seem basically to confirm one point: Estonian film industry is taking the right path, even though some efforts are required in order to increase the funding of local productions. However, the positive and encouraging trends are not only related to the Estonian film industry. In this country another excellent sector is represented by education and its professionals, especially as concerns primary education. Once again, statistics corroborates the high level of Estonian primary education. Particularly, the latest 2016 OECD Review of School Resources

ranks the national school system as “very-high performing” [Santiago, Levitas, Radó and Shewbridge, 2016]. This document pinpoints some of the main qualities of Estonian primary education, such as the full access to education, the very good usage of new technologies for learning purposes, the absence of illiteracy, the good local autonomy of schools and school leaders, and the well-established teacher professional development programs. Nonetheless, further efforts are required in terms of integration practices for Russian speakers and students with special needs as well as greater funding for pre-primary education.

Moreover, 2012 OECD PISA test overview clearly demonstrates that Estonian students at the age of 15 – after having accomplished their primary education – achieved outstanding skills in reading (10th in the OECD zone), science, and mathematics (7th in the OECD zone). Finally, the good quality of Estonian primary education is also confirmed by the average difference in results, between the students with the highest socio-economic background and the students with the lowest socio-economic background, which is just 62 points (figure 3). This number is much lower than the OECD average of 96 points and the lowest gap amongst OECD countries: in other words, Estonian students learn reading, science and mathematics at the same level, regardless of their families’ financial position.

2012 OECD PISA test overview

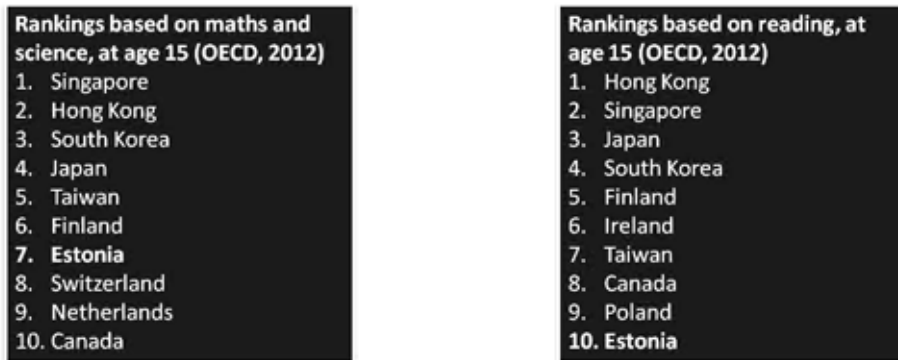


Figure 3. OECD PISA 2012 results – overview

This is undoubtedly a remarkable achievement in a country that is struggling to solve social inequality issues and aims to increase minimum wages, in order to align them with the E.U. average.

The improvement of living standards over the last 25 years allowed Estonia to achieve progressive transition from a Soviet state-controlled system to an advanced, high income economy. The reasons of this success are due to the ease



Figure 4. 2016 Estonia Ease of Doing Business Report
 Doingbusiness.org – World Bank Group
 (<http://www.doingbusiness.org/data/exploreeconomies/estonia>)

of doing business, the efficient bureaucracy, and the favorable tax rates (figure 4). Particularly, one of the widest economic sectors which contributed to develop Estonian economy was IT. We all know how much the success of this country is based on Skype, e-residency, and digital tax returns. Moreover, nowadays Tallinn hosts a significant technology cluster, made of numerous startups in continuous expansion. The IT workforce speaks different languages, is well educated and holds a rich set of computer science and cross-media production-related competences. In Estonia innovation is undeniably made through well planned e-strategies, both on a public and private level.

Therefore, we can easily realize that IT sector, primary education and the emerging film industry have an incredible potential for development. Hence, is it possible to combine the right qualified workforce of these three sectors, in order to create excellent products? The following proposal suggests a concrete solution to maximize productivity and create a number of inspiring works for the international audience.

I do believe that these joint forces may be the perfect match to create outstanding didactic documentaries. The right Estonian specialists, indeed, may produce different series of documentaries for learning purposes, divided into several age groups (e.g., pre-school children from 3 to 5, primary school students from 5 to 10, and pre-teens from 11 to 13). Of course, the target audience must be very well-defined, in order to pursue all the pedagogic goals, but also to properly sustain the viewers' attention. The target audiences, in this case, have a deep influence on many aspects of the film, such as length, rhythm, sound, and colours.

In my opinion, all the works should be guided by the highest learning purposes. Even though there may be free space for experimentalism and improvisation, I think that most of these documentaries should follow the basic principles of the

successful format “play and learn”. For this reason, I do believe that the active cooperation between filmmakers – who better know the medium “movie camera” – and education specialists – who better know the children and their complex world – is essential. The right alchemy would allow these documentaries to be entertaining, informative, and pedagogically valuable. Filmmakers would not lose their artistic touch and educators would effectively pursue their didactic goals.

But what about the content of these documentaries? There are countless creative possibilities. In my opinion one of the major pressing needs in terms of learning for children under the age of 10 concerns the lack of adequate media literacy. Living in such an overwhelming audiovisual society and not being aware of the different functioning of media leaves our children totally unprotected and, as often as not, isolated. This is definitely a challenging task, but I believe that the best Estonian experts would be able to provide children with valuable knowledge regarding the nature of media, such as television, newspapers, radio, and cinema.

In the same way, different “how does it work?” series of documentaries may be produced. Children, indeed, need to learn what for adults is definitely taken for granted and is part of our society and our everyday life. Most of adults know what is an airplane, how the telephone works, and why cars cause smog and pollution. Most of the children, on the contrary, may acquire a considerable set of skills after accomplishing their primary education, but not be aware about some of the basic aspects which involve their existence and the world around them. For this purpose, also series of documentaries aimed to illustrate cultures and countries of the world may be useful. There is a great need of simplifying knowledge, in order to stimulate students to acquire – in the long term – an in-depth knowledge of the proposed topics.

In order to achieve this goal and to produce high quality documentaries, in my opinion it is important to consider some of their main features. These documentaries, in my view, cannot replace the teachers’ work, but may be a valid didactic support; they should have a strong international and multicultural dimension in order to promote the value of integration; they should be – preferably – easy to export through the usage of subtitles and voice-over done by artists; they must present warm, comfortable settings, sounds, and hosts. Documentaries certainly deal with the sphere of unknown, but in this case the primary goal is to provide children with solid knowledge. For this reason, the overall look of these audiovisual products must be somehow reassuring and colourful in the right balance, but at the same time preventing any kind of extreme idealization. Of course, there may be still some space for exploring doubts and uncertainties, but this has to be done cautiously and contents should be accurately selected by filmmakers and education specialists.

At this point, probably someone would ask: what kind of format fits best for this kind of project? There are actually no precise boundaries. The project, for instance, may be launched as a short or feature film for cinema screens, but may be easily transformed into a TV programme. Therefore, films just represent a starting point of a wider learning process. In the 2010s knowledge does not only spread thanks to the extensive usage of merely one medium. For this reason, the most obvious outcome of this project must involve cross-media platforms. At this stage – or even from the very beginning – IT experts may join the team of filmmakers and education specialists and support their work, in order to expand the scope of the contents. These experts possess the required set of skills to develop the interactivity of these contents, which may be also transformed into an application for mobile phones, a videogame, a video installation for a museum, an interactive e-book, and didactic digital devices for teachers, and so on. Of course, there are thousands of possible solutions. Everything actually relies on the primary learning purposes, which will basically guide the selection of contents, formats, and distribution platform (“What do we need to teach?”).

Therefore, Estonian filmmakers, IT experts, and education specialists have the opportunity to master a new creative direction, which is mostly unexplored and may specifically support knowledge transmission and literacy processes all over the world. These contents could be especially needed in the poorest and most undeveloped regions of the world, as knowledge, in the long term, may bring more wealth and social awareness. Certainly, it is difficult to have a precise estimate regarding the impact of this kind of products, but the assessment of their export potential is one of the aspects which needs to be always taken into account, in order to make the business profitable and not dependent on state grants.

Though it has a limited internal market, Estonian documentary film industry is now vibrant and flourishing. This project may increase the chances to provide Estonian documentaries with new international audience, mostly represented by children, teachers, and parents. The main limitation is perhaps presented by budgetary constraints, but this problem may be solved searching for the right foreign co-production partners. Finland and other Northern European countries, for example, could financially support these kinds of international projects, sharing their knowledge and manpower as well.

Probably it is not possible for Estonia to compete with bigger film industries on the mainstream level, but investing as much as possible on what Estonians are good at – teaching, shooting, and programming – may definitely give a valuable contribution to the development of the local film industry and stimulate the cultural growth of the country. I am firmly convinced, indeed, that the future starts with children and their education.

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