

# SCREENING SPACE IN FILM ADAPTATIONS OF ESTONIAN HISTORICAL FICTION: "THE LAST RELIC" (1969) AND "BETWEEN THREE PLAGUES" (1970)<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article analyses the spatial representations of "The Last Relic" (*Viiimne reliikvia*, Grigori Kromanov, 1969) and "Between Three Plagues" (*Kolme katku vahel*, Virve Aruoja, 1970). While almost diametrically different in terms of intention, execution and reception, the films exemplify the complex interplay of the past and the present that is typical to screen adaptations of historical fiction. "The Last Relic" and "Between Three Plagues" belong to the same wave of cinematic works that was inspired by debates on the architectural heritage of Tallinn's Old Town in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Using this historical urban environment, as well as its broader field of connotations, as a central point of reference, the films provide intriguing critiques of the late Soviet period that was characterised by negotiations of power, identity and history. As specimens of the heritage film genre, "The Last Relic" and "Between Three Plagues" open up a room for discussing the discursive intricacies of narrating the nation, demonstrating that industrial conditions, audio-visual structures and ideological undercurrents can sometimes lead to unexpected, even conflicting constellations.

**Keywords:** *Estonian cinema, heritage film, spatial representations, "The Last Relic" (Viiimne reliikvia, 1969), "Between Three Plagues" (Kolme katku vahel, 1970).*

## Introduction

This article looks at two Soviet Estonian screen adaptations of historical novels: "The Last Relic" (*Viiimne reliikvia*, Grigori Kromanov, Tallinnfilm, 1969), based on

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Eduard Bornhöhe's novel "Prince Gabriel or The Last Days of Pirita Monastery" (*Vürst Gabriel ehk Pirita kloostri viimased päevad*, 1893), which became a box-office favourite throughout the Soviet Union and even beyond; and "Between Three Plagues" (*Kolme katku vahel*, Virve Aruoja, Eesti Telefilm, 1970) that reached a much less extensive TV audience and the connections of which to its literary "source", a multi-part novel of the same title (1970–1980) by Jaan Kross, are more complicated. These screen adaptations are considered from the perspective of spatial representations. I will examine the strategies and devices employed by the scriptwriters, directors and production designers for constructing these cinematic spaces, as well as the way the films related to their literary hypotexts. My analysis draws on the understanding that a novel and its screen adaptation are not involved in a hierarchical relationship of an *original* and a *copy*; rather, they should be perceived as artworks of equal standing that are associated by links of intertextuality [Stam 2000; Hutcheon 2006]. In the final part of the article, I will evoke Deleuzian concepts of time-image and movement-image [Deleuze 1986 and 1989] as interpreted in relation to narrating the nation by David Martin-Jones and Jeffrey Skoller, in order to theorise the way these films utilise historical narratives for constructing and (re)producing national identity.

### Urban, literary and cinematic intertextualities

Like adaptations of historical novels in general, both "The Last Relic" and "Between Three Plagues" speak, perhaps even primarily, about their time of production; about the present rather than the past [Sorlin 1980: 170]. In this regard, it is important to recall the role of Tallinn's Old Town as a locus of resistance in Soviet Estonian culture. Representations of the Old Town, as well as its architectural features, have always served as an essential arena for intriguing negotiations between conflicting ideologies and (national) identities, evoking complex issues of power, resistance and adaptation. In the 1960s, the Old Town in particular and medieval heritage in general acquired unprecedented topicality in academic circles and mass culture alike, inspiring a broad range of visual and literary texts. A somewhat nostalgic and romantic "medieval trend" materialised in various articles of consumer goods, many interior designs and in an extensive array of motion pictures. In cinema, the trend is especially conspicuous between 1969 and 1972 when every third feature film released in Estonia relied on the imagery of the Old Town [for more detail see Näripea 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d].

"The Last Relic" and "Between Three Plagues" form a part of this cycle, while also sharing the same historical spatiotemporal frame of reference – both are set in and around Tallinn during the Livonian War (1558–1583). Despite covering a certain common ground, the films are clearly set apart by some remarkable differences.

Perhaps most prominent is their dissimilarity in terms of genre. “The Last Relic” is a romantic adventure film with a mass appeal, which became an international blockbuster and a cult classic to a great extent due to its main message – struggle for freedom. This thirst for emancipation resonated not only with the colonised peoples across the former Eastern Bloc at the time of the film’s release, but also with several generations of audiences in the capitalist “free world”, the restrictions of which might be subtler than those of the “Soviet prison of nations”, yet not significantly less limiting in their ultimate effects. By contrast, Jaan Kross, the author of the screenplay, defined “Between Three Plagues” as a psychological-historical drama [Kross 1965: 2], designed as an intentional escape from the field of mass entertainment and deliberately targeted at a more refined segment of the domestic market. As a result, the film’s sphere of influence remained modest and it has been virtually forgotten by today. Equally interesting are the diverse alignments of the respective hypotexts and hypertexts in terms of genre and mode of expression. While Börnhöhe’s novel stays well within the limits of a historical romance, “The Last Relic” is generically amphibious, a hybrid that draws on tropes of costume dramas, historical and romantic adventure films, westerns (or, more precisely, their eastern counterparts) and even parodic comedies. In the case of “Between Three Plagues”, the opposite is true – the film is decidedly executed as a pure-bred historical drama loyal to conventions of cinematic storytelling, while Kross’ novel is regarded as a remarkable innovation in Estonian literature for its mode of narration that synthesises several voices – “the text of the chronicler, staged scenes and the internal monologue of the protagonist” [Veidemann 2011: 119]. In terms of cinematic form, “The Last Relic” is a fast-paced colour film, while “Between Three Plagues” is black-and-white and notably slow in its narrative drive. The budget of “The Last Relic” reached a record high in Tallinnfilm’s history (750,000 roubles, twice the budget of an average film; Teinmaa 2001), while “Between Three Plagues” was a relatively low-budget production. Finally, Tallinnfilm was a transnational enterprise in all respects [for more detail, see Näripea 2012], and carefully monitored by centralised censorship organs, while Eesti Telefilm catered mainly for the domestic audience and faced considerably fewer constraints in terms of censorship until the early 1970s. These differences are crucial when tracing the films’ varying attitudes towards historical urban space and its representation.

### **Spatial subversions in “The Last Relic”**

“The Last Relic” presents a complicated love story between Agnes and Gabriel on the background of the conspiracies and plots of the church and the nobility, and the revolt of Estonian peasants against these institutions. In terms of *mise-en-scène*, the authors of “The Last Relic” were relatively unconstrained by the prescriptions of Börnhöhe’s original text, simply because the author of the novel had remained rather

laconic when describing the spaces of action. Hence, the filmmakers were at liberty to fill the gaps of the literary forerunner to their own liking. While the ideologically subversive manoeuvres of “The Last Relic” have been predominantly examined in relation to the film’s soundtrack [in particular the lyrics, see Torop 2002], the ideologically ambiguous sub-currents of its spatial representations have received much less attention.

The film’s mischievous politics and spatial sabotages of the Soviet hegemony are particularly noticeable in one of the central locations of the film – the monastery [Kaljundi 2007]. Imagined as a stronghold and symbol of repressive masters, the monastery is attacked and plundered in both the novel and the film. Yet while in the former the Pirita Monastery is razed to the ground by Ivan the Terrible’s ruthless army, then in the latter it falls victim to Estonian peasant insurgents. This shift of nationality (and, consequently, falsification of historical facts) of the assailants was most likely an act of self-censorship on the part of the filmmakers, yet by employing a series of artistic filters they granted a clearly contemporary national-political dimension to the hijacked historical event – after all, it is quite easy to imagine the cynical masters of the monastery as standing for the representatives of another well-known repressive system. The empty, luminous, clinically cold rooms of the monastery function as a spatial metaphor for the arrogance and hypocrisy of the clerical institutions as well as the Soviet regime. Against the background of this clean radiance, the dark silhouettes of the monks stand out in a particularly graphic manner. Equally dark are their deeds, their cynical and cold-blooded intrigues in the name of their “holy cause”. As in any ideologically correct Soviet film, the church is imagined in a negative light – the nunnery is a place where helpless women are imprisoned and where all kinds of crimes are committed under the veil of sanctity. Even the abbot has to admit that the monks living in his monastery are “drunkards, thieves, debauchees, lazy-bones, numskulls”. At the time of the film’s release, these words must have sounded like a deliciously audacious assessment of the regime that picked up the bill for the entire undertaking.

At the same time, for at least those local spectators who were aware of the heated debates over Estonia’s built heritage and the vigorous efforts to protect it in the late 1960s [for more detail see Näripea 2005a], the monastery, as well as the Old Town that makes its appearance in a few brief but remarkable scenes, must have served as a sign and reminder of the fact that the local spatial culture essentially belongs to the West rather than to the East. Moreover, the portrayal of the monastery and the Old Town as places of corruption and sin can be seen as an ironically self-reflexive commentary of the filmmakers on the massively popular “medieval trend” that commercialised this historical built environment in order to fuel the Soviet economy with the hard currency of the Western tourists. In its representations of the Old Town,

“The Last Relic” avoids the most easily recognisable architectural “gems” and instead favours rustic romanticism, exhibiting the dirty brown-grey colouring of patina on limestone building blocks and demonstrating the heaviness of squared timber. On the one hand, this visual idiom highlights the film’s generic undercurrents of romance and supports the common understanding of the “Dark Ages” as a drab and rough era. On the other hand, however, this emphasis on textures can also be read as an intentional act of resistance to the most blatantly commercial manifestations of the “medieval trend”, which frequently relied on images of the *façades* of selected landmark buildings. The idea of city as a nest of corruption is spatially summarised in the form of a tavern where Gabriel meets Siim after having escaped imprisonment in the monastery. Waiting for Ivo Schenkenberg who had almost killed him earlier, Gabriel plots his revenge, accompanied by a song that talks about selling oneself, one’s faith and truth. Also, in the tavern sits an idle, lute-fiddling prostitute who comes across as an almost literal embodiment of the trope “Tallinn as a whore”, in a marked contrast to Agnes’s almost angelic look. Equally, the analogy of prostitution can be evoked in relation to Hans von Risbieter, a knight residing in Tallinn, who is prepared to exchange spiritual and divine values for carnal pleasures. Again, as with the inhabitants of the monastery, it is not difficult to imagine the contemporary equivalents of these derogatory comparisons. These are some of the ways in which the connotative terrain of the built environment is integrated into the film’s critiques of the dominant regime, all the while the mechanisms of the same regime were used to turn “The Last Relic” into a blockbuster that attracted millions of spectators.

In sum, regarding the relations between the good and the evil, as well as the spatial representation of these relations, “The Last Relic” is nearly in every respect a true-to-regime film, which has all the prerequisites for being a part of mind-numbing and repressive entertainment mechanism of the society of spectacle – a relatively simple adventure story with a happy ending and with just the right amount of romance and music. And yet the film managed to acquire clearly discernible connotations of national resistance, particularly through music, but also through subtle shifts in spatial representations. By means of lyrics, but also with the help of the various ambiguities related to the main settings of its story – the monastery and the Old Town – the film performed a brief intervention into the discursive space of the dominant power, creating a vacuum where, for a moment, the Other reigned.

### **The anti-tourist space-time of the Old Tallinn in “Between Three Plagues”**

Set in Tallinn in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, “Between Three Plagues” is a biopic of Balthasar Russow, one of the most prominent Livonian and Estonian chroniclers, and the Lutheran pastor of the Estonian congregation at Tallinn’s Holy

Spirit Church. The film focuses on struggles arising from his social position between the German and Swedish upper classes and Estonian peasants. One of the contemporary commentators described the *mise-en-scène* and cinematography of “Between Three Plagues” as akin to *rigid medieval engravings* [Tobro 1970]. It is certainly true that the atmosphere of the film is rather reflective than dynamic, which decisively sets it apart from the spectacularity and false optimism of socialist realism. The compositions, camera movements and spatial configurations are characterised by a sense of minimalism, moderation, even rigor.

In terms of its visual style, “Between Three Plagues” resembles the works of Scandinavian authors, such as Carl Theodor Dreyer (especially “Day of Wrath”/ *Vredens dag*, 1943) and Ingmar Bergman (especially “The Seventh Seal”/ *Det sjunde inseglet*, 1957). Indeed, the work of Anton Mutt, the cinematographer of “Between Three Plagues”, betrays strong impulses of the Scandinavian tradition, primarily in delicate and precise treatment of light and shadow for constructing forceful visual compositions and conveying various moods. For instance, in “Day of Wrath” the shadows that linger on the face of the protagonist Anne Pedersdotter signal her emotional splintering, her dilemma between surrendering to the power of passion and adhering to the social conventions. In “Between Three Plagues”, Russow’s wife Elsbet is torn by a similar love triangle, and the film uses the same device for visualising her predicament, although less consistently than in “Day of Wrath”. The restrained pace of editing is also characteristic to the Scandinavian films as well as to “Between Three Plagues”. Furthermore, “Day of Wrath” and “Between Three Plagues” share a comparable situation of spatial limitations that stands for the restrictive influence of external (social) forces on the lives of the protagonists, as well as for the liminality of their personal circumstances. While in “Day of Wrath” Anne is accused of witchcraft, of crossing the borders between this world and the next, in “Between Three Plagues” Russow is suspected of being a double agent, of serving several masters and thus surpassing the limits of his power; he also frequently moves between various ethnical, cultural and class spheres. The image of border as a (spatial) metaphor that plays a significant role for Russow’s figure in Kross’ novel has been also noticed by Juhani Salokannel who has written that “his Estonian descent and German education take Russow to the border of two worlds” [Salokannel 2009: 199]. In the film, the notion of borders, as well as limitations, is additionally signalled by numerous doors, through which people keep coming and going, and which tend to open for Russow with particular ease, thus suggesting that nothing can stand on his quest for the truth.

The inertia that contemporary commentators found to be an important fault of “Between Three Plagues” stems to a significant extent from Jüri Arrak’s drawings that mimic the appearance of woodcut prints. In part, these illustrations depicting the

silhouette of Tallinn, scenes of the Livonian War and agony of the city afflicted with plague were predominantly necessitated by budgetary limits, which prevented the filmmakers from building lavish sets or employing intricate special effects for portraying the distant past and panoramic events. More importantly, however, the minimalism of these prints provided a welcomed alternative to naturalistic, sensationalist representations of *the bloody Middle Ages ... when war, plague and famine were regular guests* [Tobro 1970]. By rejecting the Hollywoodian tradition that seduces mass audiences with promises of bloodshed and notoriety, the authors of “Between Three Plagues” treated its spectators with more respect, as a refined and educated public that does not need to be attracted with graphic violence and decaying corpses.

In fact, the goal to resist easy entertainment was embedded into the very first version of Kross’s screenplay, which resolutely prohibited *the exhibition of old architecture and museum pieces*, instead asking to highlight the *material texture of the backgrounds and larger props – cobblestone pavement, grain of timber, rough textiles and, especially, limestone walls* [Kross 1965: 2]. The result confirms that Kross’ guidelines were indeed followed – the exterior shots are never panoramically sweeping, as was characteristic to more “tourism-oriented” productions; and the emphasis is on the heaviness of limestone walls that underline the overwhelming anxiety and sense of entrapment in a city tormented by war and plague. Even spacious rooms seem to be haunted by a sense of claustrophobia, which is supported by cinematographic techniques and graphic inserts. These choices correspond with Kross’ vision that *in terms of the optics, the film should strive for a graphic rather than spatial impression. The eyes of the optical style-makers should be turned to the black-and-white naiveté and rigor of medieval woodcuts, rather than to the perfect lustre of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s forms* [Kross 1965: 2]. At the same time, because of the modest proportion of location shooting and the pre-eminence of medium-range shots, the city does not develop into a character in its own right, unlike later in the novel [Liivamets 1978; Kreem 2008]. And yet, especially in comparison with “The Last Relic”, Kross’ attempt to present *an urban space that relies on personal experience* [Kreem 2008: 1082] is clearly discernible both in the filmic and the literary incarnations of “Between Three Plagues”. While in “The Last Relic” the topography of Tallinn serves the purposes of the cinematic narrative, replacing the actual urban space with a decidedly abstract “filmic city” targeted to international audiences, in “Between Three Plagues” the locations of action and shooting coincide with the real and concrete historical sites, thus instilling a certain sense of immediacy and verity that finds its most appreciating audience on the home turf.

Although making significant efforts to ensure historical accuracy, as well as finding fresh camera angles and locations, “Between Three Plagues” falls short on providing impressive architectural metaphors comparable to those in “The Last

Relic". At the same time, the absence of popular music and the lack of romanticism typical to the "medieval trend" indicates that "Between Three Plagues" sidesteps the repressive desire machine of mass entertainment, refusing to (re)produce illusions of airbrushed Soviet "reality", unlike so many other productions in this popular wave of Old Town films. The same ambition can be detected in the ambivalence of meaning that is central to the text of the screenplay, as well as in a number of elements that are both ideologically problematic and highly topical in the context of the Soviet society of the time – for instance, the issue of censorship and the (im)possibility of speaking the truth; the struggle between the structures of power and the creative class; the problem of sacrificing one's ideals and values in the name of day-to-day existence. Hence, as any historical film, "Between Three Plagues" uses the past in order to interrogate the present, just like "Day of Wrath" drew parallels between the witch-hunts of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the Nazi occupation in Denmark of the 1940s, or "The Seventh Seal" compared the 14<sup>th</sup>-century fear of the Black Death with the anxieties provoked by the nuclear threat in the 1950s. However, despite these thematic analogies and textual ambiguities, "Between Three Plagues" remained firmly within the limits of permissibility and did not contest the main ideological tenets of the Soviet system, thus being an example of adaptation rather than outright resistance, even if serving as a site of cultural difference.

### **Historical narrative and national identity**

In terms of relationships between historical narrative, audio-visual form and representation of national identity, "The Last Relic" and "Between Three Plagues" function in a somewhat unexpected manner. In spite of its upbeat and deceitfully superficial entertainment values, "The Last Relic" facilitates ambivalent and subversive procedures of interpretation and identification, while the boldly anti-mainstream visual form of "Between Three Plagues" conceals a narrative force field that clearly favours a single understanding of history and national identity. For analysing this paradoxical situation, I will draw on Gilles Deleuze's concepts of movement-image and time-image [Deleuze 1986 and 1989], as well as on David Martin-Jones and Jeffrey Skoller's renditions of Deleuzian ideas in relation to cinematic representations of national identity and history.

In the broadest sense, Deleuze formulated the notions of movement-image and time-image as theoretical tools that describe the different practices of editing in American and European cinema. To summarise very briefly, the movement-image refers to *the unbroken, linear narrative, based upon the continuity editing rules established by the Hollywood studio system and the time-image to the cinemas of the new waves which experimented with discontinuous narrative time* [Martin-Jones 2006: 2]. Martin-Jones connects the two modes with representations of national identities in

films. Borrowing from Homi K. Bhabha, he suggests that movement-image tends to be more or less *pedagogical* in its drive *to establish one dominant view of national history, and identity*, while the labyrinthine time-image reflects the potentially ungrounding *performative rethinking* of those notions [Martin-Jones 2006: 33]. In a similar way, Jeffrey Skoller argues that so-called conventional films are essentially *closed*, validating, naturalising and reinforcing dominant ideology and hegemonic narratives of the past, while avant-garde films remain *open*, challenging the established *truths* and offering alternative perspectives [Skoller 2005: xv–xxxiii]. It is important to emphasise that, according to Martin-Jones, most films are in fact hybrids, combining and intertwining the elements of movement-image and time-image. Indeed, this kind of hybridity characterises both “The Last Relic” and “Between Three Plagues”. Perhaps most interestingly, while thoroughly entertaining and in general operating within the framework of the so-called *Hollywood-Mosfilm* [Butler 2007: 92] tradition of storytelling, “The Last Relic” remains remarkably open to conflicting and even rebellious modes of interpretation and identification, offering moments that can be called *performative* in the sense described by Homi K. Bhabha [Bhabha 1990: 297]. Despite playing on the field the rules of which were determined by the dominant ideology, “The Last Relic” enriched the hegemonic understanding of history with essentially contradictory elements. Meanwhile, “Between Three Plagues”, which made every effort to resist the mainstream in its patterns of audio-visual and architectural representation, is surprisingly conservative, cautious and closed in its narrative form and ideological undercurrents, in many ways cementing a certain single *truth* – a *pedagogic* understanding of history. Although it is true that the national self-image nurtured by “Between Three Plagues” was secondary to, and effectively jeopardised by, the dominant narrative of *the great Soviet family of nations*, this does not change the point that the film advocates for a return to a single *truth* about the past, rather than opens up various points of view. In this regard, Kross’ subsequent novel is much more heterogeneous, demonstrating that he disapproved any heroisation of history and *was open to discrepancies and uncertainties* [Salokannel 2009: 179].

### Conclusion

Although it can be argued that “The Last Relic” and “Between Three Plagues” are very different films, it is important to reiterate that they share a number of similarities, including the general framework of the “medieval trend” that is in various ways critiqued in both works. Furthermore, as screen adaptations of historical novels, “The Last Relic” and “Between Three Plagues” tend to talk more about their own time and less about the past they portray. However, “The Last Relic” has stood the test of time significantly better than “Between Three Plagues” and it continues to

have an impact on how certain historical events, places and periods are understood by new generations, both in terms of the film's diegetic time-space and that of its time of making.

Finally, at a time when isolationist forces, demanding stricter political control over autonomous institutions, advocating for a return to "traditional", patriarchal values that severely challenge the most basic human rights, and surreptitiously inducing a deepening sense of (self) censorship, grow increasingly prominent the idea of freedom and, in particular, freedom of speech, which is central to both films, is gaining altogether new urgency, giving them a new lease of life.

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