



The World of Estonian Animation: Achieving Independence of Imagination!

“Estonia is a big little nation of animation. For a country of 1.4 million inhabitants, it has a long record of winning international animation festival awards and has many well-known and revered animators.”

Heikki Jokinen



Is the Earth Round?
(dir. Priit Pärn, 1977)

Empty Space
(dir. Ülo Pikkov, 2016)



Hell (dir. Rein Raamat, 1983)



Little Lily
(dir. Mati Kütt, 1995)

A glimpse of new-age Estonian animations

Source: Estonian Film Institute



Animation is a coveted field of cinema that engages in imagination beyond the limitations of the real world. Several national cinemas have distinct places for animated films in their cinematic histories. However, the 'home-produced animation from Estonia' has emerged as a forerunner of world-class animation in the age of steep competition between various international animation studios. The works produced by native Estonian animators and studios have a distinct authenticity to them that surpasses the saturation of mainstream Hollywood giants like *Pixar*, *Disney*, and *DreamWorks*. We will dive into the evolution of animation in Estonia, and the film works that stand out as the epitome of imagination.



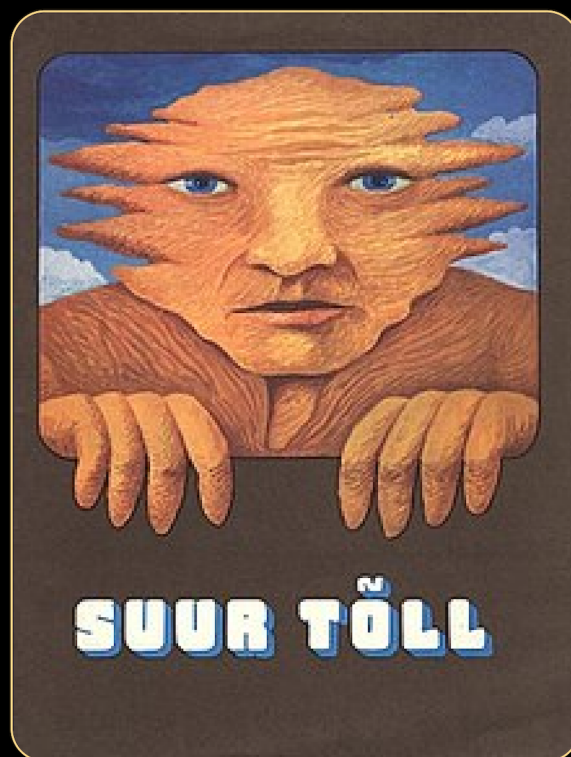
The consistent theme of absurdity in visuals in Estonian animation: *Tendrils* (2017)
Source: Scenes from the film *Tendrils*





The realm of animated films has played a significant cultural role in Estonia. Estonians have particularly progressed in animation much before the development of live-action films. This is evident in the fact that Estonia's animation community ranks among the best in the world. Their works are characterized by a unique irony of 'absurdity in visuals and meaningful narratives' and depicted with a dark sense of humor. They usually adapt Estonian folk tales and children's stories into animations that carry a strong, impressionable purpose rather than mere entertainment.

A widely famous animated film, *About Tyll the Giant (1980)*, was directed by Rein Raamat and is based on the Estonian myth of a beastly-looking yet humble giant called *Suur Tõll*. The myth and the adapted film follow the story of a giant who lives a peaceful life as a farmer and the humble king of an island called *Saaremaa*. However, his beastly side unleashes as his wife gets killed and his lands are invaded by *Vanapagan (Old Devil)*. He kills the Old Devil as revenge for himself and his people and goes on to live a life of seclusion, where he emerges only when his people need help. Interestingly, the themes of this myth have a strong reminiscence of the popular American film *King Kong (1933)* - the story of a giant good-willed ape. *About Tyll the Giant* is considered a classic horror animated film, popular among children in Estonia and the Soviet Union. The film's unusual imagery and majestic soundtrack establish it as a quintessential work of Estonian animation (Teetsov, 2022).



About Tyll the Giant (1980)
Source: Wikipedia





Some of the other most recognized animated films from the country include *Is the Earth Round* (1977), *Tendrils* (2017), *Amalimbo* (2016), and *Raggie* (2020). Such creativity has led them to many international platforms and global acclaim. For instance, the animated film *Põld* (1978) was nominated for Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival in 1979 (Estonian Film Institute, n.d.). However, the road to acclaim started from the origins of animation in the 1930s.



Kutsu-Juku seiklusi (1931)
Source: Letterboxd





A scene from the early animation of *Kutsu-Juku seiklusi*
Source: Rao Heidmets (YouTube)

An experimental wave of cinema commenced in Estonia in the 1930s, where the animation industry underwent a significant development process. The first product of this wave was the silent animated film called *Kutsu-Juku seiklusi* (*Adventures of Juku the Dog*) (1931). Directed by Voldemar Päts, the simplistic black-and-white film was an extraordinary feat at the time as it was prepared with 5000 paintings and extended to 6 minutes of screen duration (currently, 4 minutes of the film are preserved). It is an intriguing tale of a puppy on his adventurous journey through a river, a jungle, and a rail track. Interestingly, the puppy's final destination on the rail track insinuates a progression toward technological development. The film has a tone of slapstick comedy with eccentric visuality of settings.





The scenes are filled with bizarre structures of natural elements like trees, rivers, birds, tadpoles, skeletons, and an imaginative presentation of landscapes. It can also be observed that it shares parallels to classic cartoons from other countries such as *Betty Boop: Dizzy Dishes* (1930), and *Gertie The Dinosaur* (1914). The understanding of the themes in this film is quintessential as it serves as the 'blueprint of the signature style of Estonian animation'.



Estonia's legendary animator - Heino Pars,
Source: Issuu



However, the creative bloom led by the experimental wave didn't continue seamlessly as the Estonian animation industry was interrupted during World War II. A strong restriction on cinema was implemented by the Soviet Union's influence during the period. Many upcoming projects were canceled. During these tough times, the birth of an animation studio started a revolution against all creative restrictions - *Nukufilm* (1957). It is the oldest-running stop motion studio in Estonia and its establishment led to the 'revival' of the animation industry in 1958.

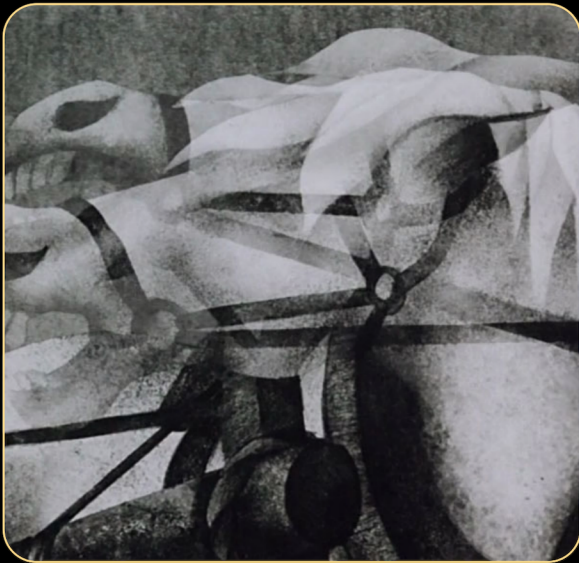
The new era of national animation was concentrated on 'hidden meanings and philosophical motifs' in short films and was led by the 'great trinity' of Estonian animators-filmmakers - *Elbert Tuganov*, *Heino Pars*, and *Rein Raamat*. *Põld* (Field) (1978) was the first animated film from Estonia to be nominated for Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival in 1979 and was directed by the legendary Rein Raamat. His contributions to the revived wave earned him the title of the 'Father of Estonian Animation' (Estonian Film Institute, n.d.).



A classic animated film *Atomic Boy and Stouts* (1970) by Elbert Tuganov

Source: Poff





Scenes from Rein Raamat's animated short films: *Pold* (1978), and *Kutt* (1976)
Source: Brandon's Movie Memory



The 'bizarreness' of Priit Pärn: *Life Without Gabriella Ferri* (2008)
Source: Animation World Network



The monumental 'second wave' of Estonian animation commenced after the country gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. During the era of post-independence, another animator-filmmaker revolutionized the industry with his exceptional use of 'satire and irony' - Priit Pärn. He became the internationally most successful Estonian animation director and also won the Grand Prize at the Ottawa International Animation Festival in 1998 for his short film *Porgandite öö* (*The Night of the Carrots*) (Awards - Estonian Academy of Arts, n.d.). He is one of the globally renowned cartoonists and animation directors whose works are critically appreciated and have been screened at numerous film festivals. Priit Pärn has continuously been active as a caricaturist and illustrator for over 50 years now (CCCB, 2009). His signature style incorporates the use of rough pencil strokes and ironic depictions of social scenarios and monotonous lives.



A scene from the animated short *Porgandite Öö* (1998)

Source: IMDb

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xk1aa0> (Priit Pärn - *Porgandite Öö*, Courtesy: Dailymotion)



Priit's color-animated film *The Night of the Carrots* (*Porgandite Öö*) (1998) is the perfect example to understand his personal style, which has further shaped the 'salient features of Estonian animations'. The animation consistently incorporates 'bizarre and eerie quality to visuals'. The visuals emphasize creating a startling impact on audiences rather than focusing on comedic timing. The cinematography of these native animations leans towards the theme of 'presenting the real world, but a distorted one'. This acts as a distinguishing characteristic compared to mainstream Hollywood animations, where the creation of a fantastical world is prioritized (for example, *Toy Story* - 1995, and *Beauty and the Beast* - 1991). The settings of the animated films from Estonia depict real-life settings, but certain elements and characters deviate from normalcy. This adds the elements of thrill and peculiarity in the animations by Estonian filmmakers.

On keen observation, Estonian animators seem to have particularly focused on the development of 'stop motion animation'. Such animation requires a filmmaking technique where an individual shot is framed and sequenced at a 'substantial gap' (denoting a 'hyphen' space between shots - 'stop' motion) with another. This provides a 'choppy' effect to the movement of subjects and an eerie quality to the animation. This format is suitable for the storylines of Estonian animations, as they are highly unconventional and aim to create an impact that is opposite to the 'glossy and perfected animations' of fairy tales.



The unique not-so-refined texture of 'stop motion animation'
Source: Pinterest





An interesting paper-textured animation in *Letting Go* (2017)

Source; NZIFF Archives 2018

The character designs in Estonian animated films are also strongly inspired by ‘caricatures.’. It appears as if the animators intentionally don’t attempt to create realistic character designs. They try to maintain the ‘not-so-refined texture’ of classic animation that breathes life into the raw imagination of children. One such intriguing work is the animation film *Letting Go* (2017) by modern Estonian animator *Ülo Pikkov*. The film depicts the story of an innocent orphan child and incorporates a unique form of paper-textured stop-motion animation (NZIFF, n.d.).





**New-age Estonian animations maintain the traditional quirkiness:
Maria and the Seven Dwarfs (2018) & *Tendrils* (2017)**
Source: NZIFF 2018 Archives

We have journeyed through the two monumental stages in the evolution of the animation industry of Estonia. However, the incorporation of computer graphics and CGI in the 21st century marked the recent stage of the 'modernization' of Estonian animation. The technological development provided an expansive scope to native Estonian animators on the international scene. The animated films and series such as *Raggie* (2020), *Maria and the Seven Dwarfs* (2018), and *Lotte and the Lost Dragons* (2019) depict the significant developments in animation techniques, computer graphics, and modern narratives integrated into the recent Estonian animated films (NZIFF, n.d.).

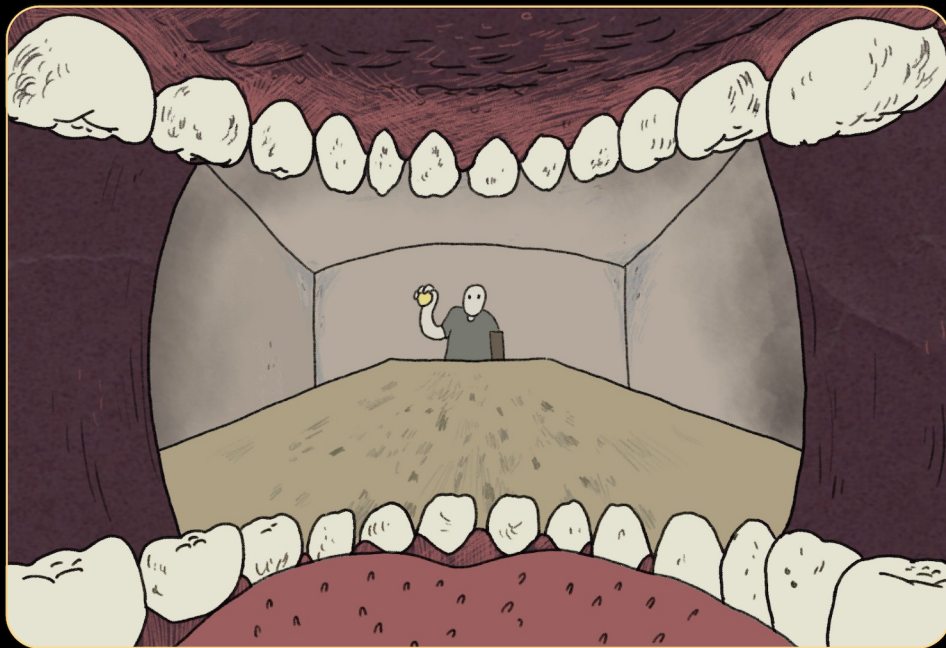
<https://vimeo.com/260391124>

(Tendrils, Courtesy: Vimeo)





The modern animation of Estonia sports a set of distinct characteristics compared to its predecessors. The dominant themes of the current era can be decoded from a meticulously crafted animated film, which was produced by the Estonian Academy of Arts and supervised by *Olga & Priit Pärn - Tendrils (2017)*. The film is a contemplative tale of a regular human who takes shelter in a botanical glasshouse amidst a storm. The plants welcome their only visitor by playfully creeping up on him and various organisms trying to interact with him. The film depicts a beautiful connection between the plants and the human, as both find each other fascinating in their monotonous lives. This film has both thematic and visual parallels to the first original Estonian animated film, *Adventures of Juku the Dog*. Another meaningful animated film is *A Table Game (2017)*, created by modern animator *Nicolás Petelski*, which was nominated in the category of 'Best Animated Short' in the Cannes Short Film Festival 2018 (Awards - Estonian Academy of Arts, n.d.)



A Table Game (2017)
Source: ADAF





Beyond the distinction of eras, Estonian animated films have a consistent pattern of using warm or high-contrast colors (often leaning towards a gray base). This color palette appears to be suitable as most of their animations don't indulge in lighter or vain themes of storytelling. The themes of the films are mysterious and consistently contain 'deeper meanings'; this attribute provides the collective of Estonian filmmakers a distinction from animators-filmmakers of other countries (especially mainstream Hollywood productions such as Walt Disney Animation Studio, and 20th Century Animation). The world of Estonian animation is rich in history and magnificent in creativity, where the stereotypical mold of animation being a childish affair has been challenged in each era. Thus, the budding Estonian animators present us with a promising future of innovative animations with critical storytelling.





References:

- (2017, November 9). *Kutsu-Juku seiklusi*. YouTube: Home. Retrieved February 15, 2024, from <https://youtu.be/LYul7XwcXSQ?si=ptm3uZH9Ud069XWs>
- *Animation NOW! Fresh Eyes on Estonia* • NZIFF - New Zealand International Film Festival. (n.d.). New Zealand International Film Festival. Retrieved February 15, 2024, from <https://www.nziff.co.nz/2018/archive/animation-now-fresh-eyes-on-estonia/>
- *ESTONIAN ANIMATION*. (n.d.). Estonian Film Institute. Retrieved February 15, 2024, from https://filmi.ee/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/EFI_anima_2018_veeb.pdf
- *Priit Parn on THE NIGHT OF THE CARROTS*. (2016, September 7). YouTube. Retrieved February 15, 2024, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8hwCRpdsr4>
- *Priit Pärn - Porgandite Öö - video Dailymotion*. (2011, July 21). Dailymotion. Retrieved February 15, 2024, from <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xk1aa0>
- *Small Country, Creative Superpower: Estonian Animation | Activities*. (2009, February 19). CCCB. Retrieved February 15, 2024, from <https://www.cccb.org/en/activities/file/small-country-creative-superpower-estonian-animation/219048>
- *Tendrils on Vimeo*. (2018, March 16). Vimeo. Retrieved February 15, 2024, from <https://vimeo.com/260391124>
- (n.d.). Awards – Estonian Academy of Arts. Retrieved February 15, 2024, from <https://www.artun.ee/en/curricula/animation/awards/>
- Teetsov, V. (2022, December 31). *The Significance of Suur Tõll (“Tõll the Great”) in Estonian Mythology*. Eesti Elu. Retrieved February 16, 2024, from <https://eestielu.ca/the-significance-of-suur-toll-toll-the-great-in-estonian-mythology/>





Image Links:

- https://filmi.ee/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/EFI_anima_2018_veeb.pdf
- <https://images.app.goo.gl/9p5TLv1TFad7nL236>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYul7XwcXSQ>
- <https://issuu.com/estonianlife/docs/eestieluno32august12/s/16576828>
- <https://poff.ee/en/film/the-holy-trinity-of-estonian-animation/>
- <https://deeperintomovies.net/journal/archives/tag/estonia>
- <https://deeperintomovies.net/journal/archives/tag/estonia>
- <https://images.app.goo.gl/C3jHgctmkQttjNgV8>
- <https://images.app.goo.gl/4enRcGCvobisGF548>
- <https://www.nziff.co.nz/2018/archive/animation-now-fresh-eyes-on-estonia/>
- <https://www.nziff.co.nz/2018/archive/animation-now-fresh-eyes-on-estonia/>
- <https://images.app.goo.gl/S6X3918hNVCyfG7g8>
- <https://images.app.goo.gl/wJXP4hHzpeyTzn616>
- <https://2018.adaf.gr/events/a-table-game/>
- <https://images.app.goo.gl/CvK6ZF1CwM9izYLG6>

