



'Last Sentinel': Estonia's Attempt in Apocalyptic Science Fiction

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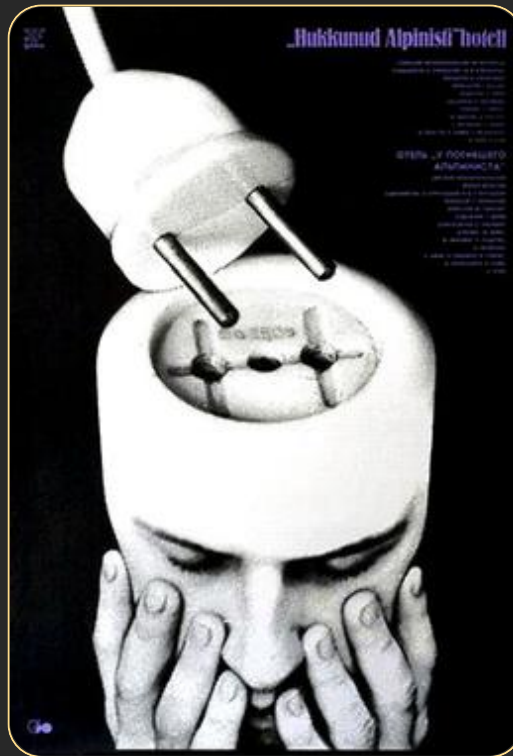


Last Sentinel (2023)

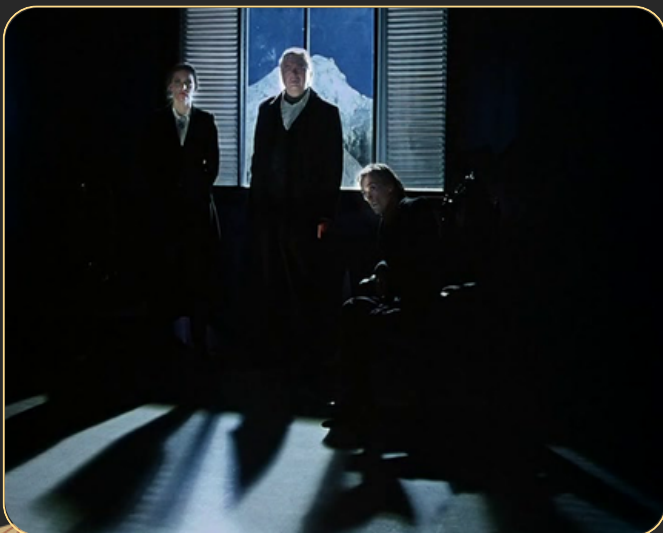
Source: Rotten Tomatoes (all images for reference)

The Estonian film industry has emerged as one of the most promising national cinemas from Eastern Europe in the 21st century. Since its beginning in 1914 with a simplistic documentary *Karujaht Pärnumaal* (Bear Hunt in Pärnumaa), the national cinema has journeyed a long way with modern conceptualization and advanced technology (IMDb, n.d.). The incorporation of high-tech filmmaking techniques can be witnessed in the blooming animation industry of Estonia, world-class cinematography, and the 'dawn of Estonia's science fiction era'. The science fiction, or futuristic fantasy, genre is a realm of themes related to the future of Earth in retrospect of elements like extraordinarily advanced technology, space-age, apocalypse, invasion by alien species, and many others. However, the science fiction genre is an 'underrated' choice for on-screen adaptations in the collective of Eastern European countries. A distinction to this scenario was made by a rising Estonian filmmaker Tanel Toom, who created a competent sci-fi film that challenges the creative standards of the West - *Last Sentinel* (2023).

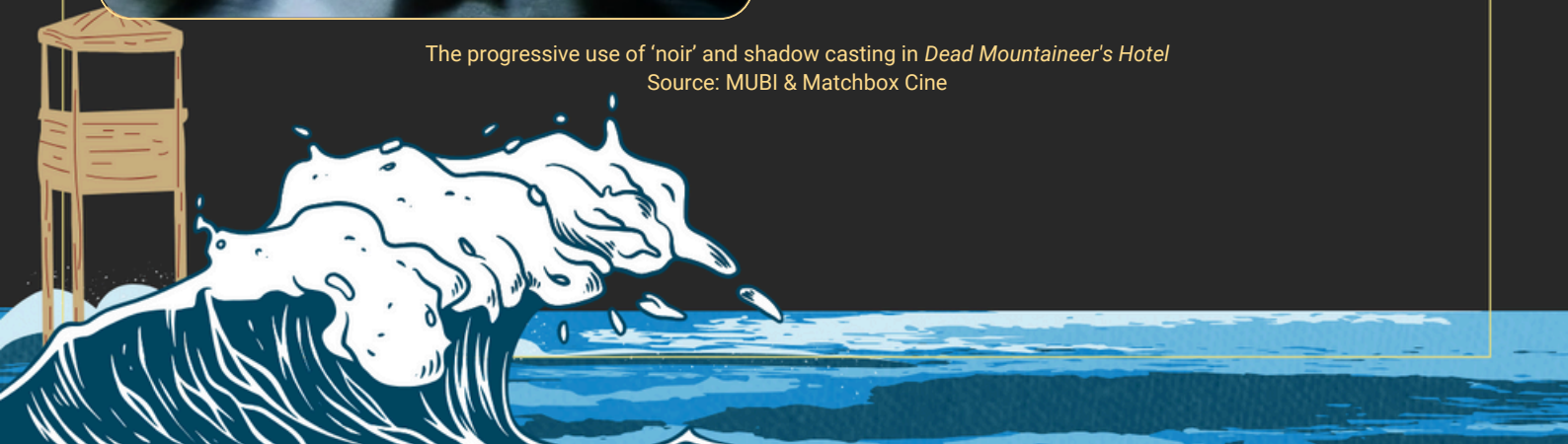




Dead Mountaineer's Hotel
Source: Wikipedia

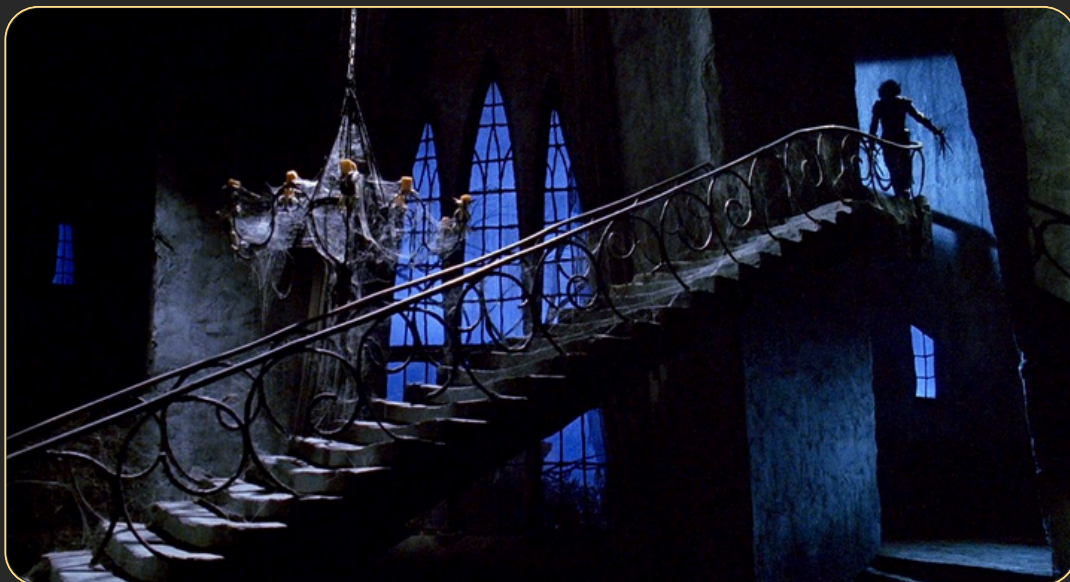


The progressive use of 'noir' and shadow casting in *Dead Mountaineer's Hotel*
Source: MUBI & Matchbox Cine

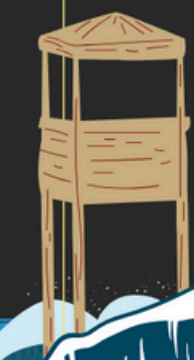


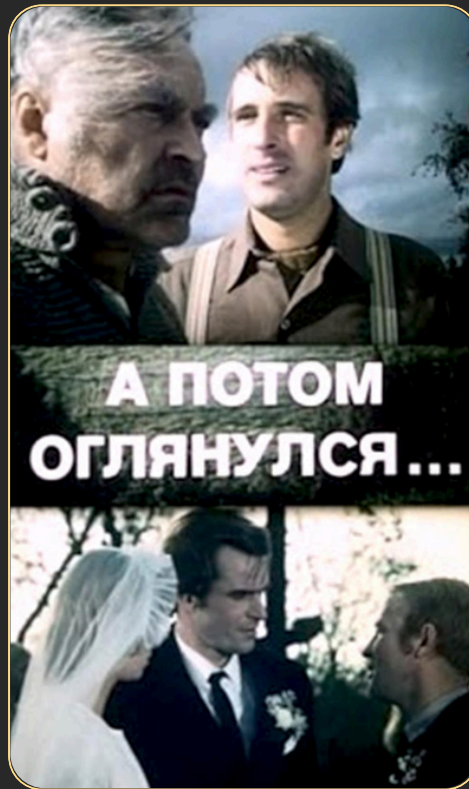


It's intriguing to note that Estonia has produced only three science fiction films in its long cinematic history of a century. The three films are *Dead Mountaineer's Hotel* (1979), *Pulmapilt* (1981), and *Last Sentinel* (2023). The causes that can be attributed to the lack of futurism in Estonian cinema are heavy emphasis on the presentation of cultural heritage, war dramas, period dramas, and lack of budget for mega-infrastructure to create an engaging sci-fi flick. Nonetheless, the early 80s attempts at futurism in Estonia were also commendable. *Dead Mountaineer's Hotel* is a Soviet-era science fiction thriller based on a novel with the same title, written by Soviet-Russian science fiction writers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky (IMDb, n.d.). The film has a firm base in literature, as the story is highly nuanced. It is based on the eerie atmosphere of an ominous hotel, where a mountaineer mysteriously perishes. The eventual sequences portray an alien in the hotel who is mistreated by the humans out of fear. This primitive attempt at sci-fi filmmaking also incorporates an intriguing blend between alien fiction and the noir genre (dark, cynical themes). Estonian director Grigori Kromanov's attempt can be considered as a piece that was ahead of its time thanks to the film's captivating yet simplistic cinematography, which also used noir and casting of shadows as a playful visual instrument. The visuals of the first Estonian sci-fi film are reminiscent of the filmmaking style of acclaimed American director Tim Burton.



Tim Burton's cinematography is parallel to the Estonian sci-fi film *Dead Mountaineer's Hotel*
Source: Cinema Archives





Pulmapilt (1981)
Source: IMDb

The next film that was released not too long after *Dead Mountaineer's Hotel* was *Pulmapilt*. The film can again be categorized as a primitive attempt at sci-fi filmmaking due to its lack of critical, substantial, and scientifically coherent subject matter. The film follows the wholesome tale of an elderly man saving the life of a lost, human-like alien, who also has capabilities of time travel. The alien returns his gratitude by teleporting the human to his day of marriage. The film shares thematic parallels with the blockbuster sci-fi film *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). Other Estonian films that partially fit into the themes of the genre are Raul Tammet's short films *Solo* (1979) and *Wedding Picture* (1980) (Näripea, n.d.). We can observe that these Estonian films were pretty playful attempts in the science fiction genre, where amazement with the unknown was emphasized over the gravity of science and the future. However, this course of 'beginner's sci-fi' in Eastern European cinema was catapulted to the next level by an Estonian film of the new millennium.



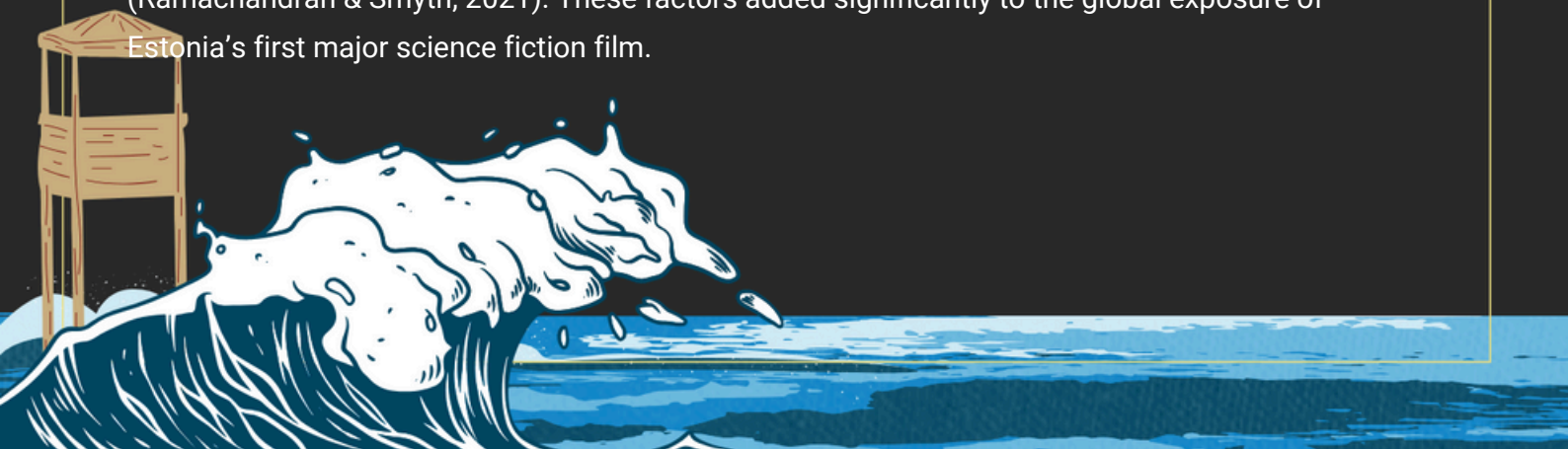


The creator of the film *Last Sentinel* - Tanel Toom
Source: IMDb



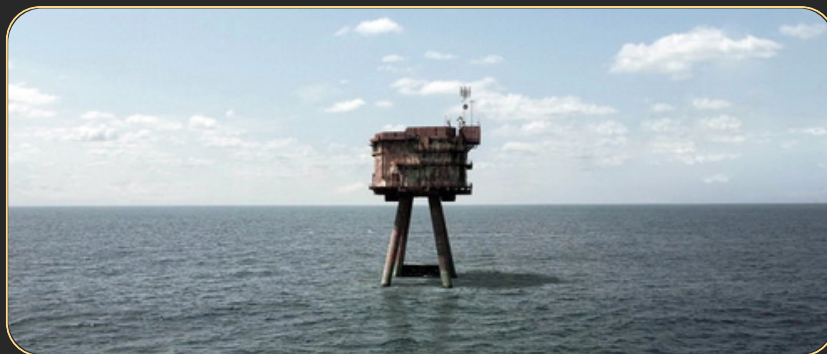
The official poster of *Last Sentinel* starring actress Kate Bosworth in the leading role
Source: IMDb

The film *Last Sentinel* (also known as *Last Contact*) can be considered the most credible and critical attempt of Estonia at science fiction filmmaking. One of the top filmmakers from Estonia who has captivated global audiences with his authentic films is Tanel Toom, the director of *Last Sentinel*. The young filmmaker's first feature film, *Truth and Justice* (2019) was nominated in the category of 'Best International Feature Film' at the 2019 Academy Awards (IMDb, n.d.). The vision for his next sci-fi feature film of 2023 appears to be based on commencing a revolutionary narrative of futurism in modern Estonian films. *Last Sentinel* has intriguingly been shot in dual languages of Estonian and English to expand the film's international outreach and relevancy. A commercial factor also lies behind the inclusion of the English language in narration as the United States and Western Europe are two of the largest markets of science fiction cinema in the world. The film also features a stunning star cast of famed American actors - Kate Bosworth (known for the film *Force of Nature*), Thomas Kretschmann (known for the acclaimed film *The Pianist*), Lucien Laviscount (known for the popular series *Emily in Paris*), and Martin McCann (known for sci-fi film *The Survivalist*) (Ramachandran & Smyth, 2021). These factors added significantly to the global exposure of Estonia's first major science fiction film.





The 'blue-themed' and dystopian settings of *Last Sentinel*
Source: Film New Europe & 1More Film Blog

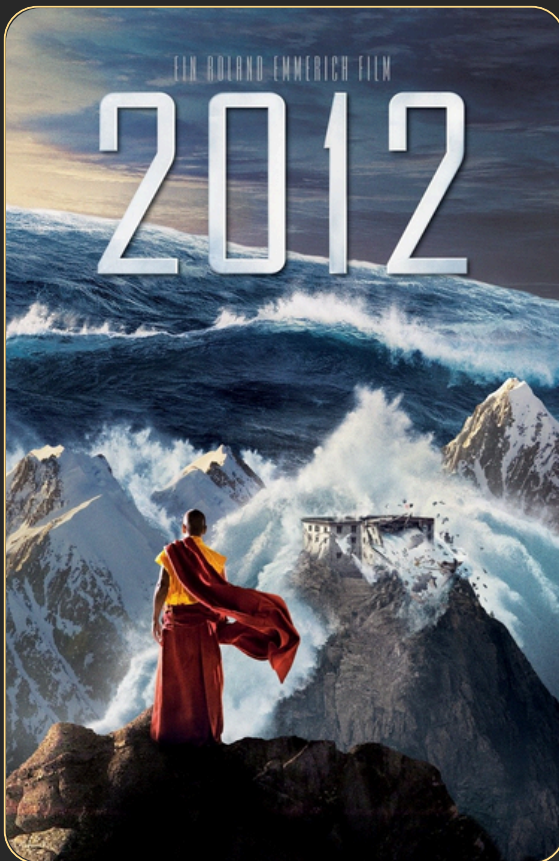


A military post (the primary setting of the film) surrounded by infinite amounts of water
Source: Horror i SF Filmovi





The film opens with a characteristic 'hazy blue' scene that forebodes the visual theme and non-definitive (unclear) ending of the film. In the year 2063, the issue of Global Warming has caused most of the world's landmass to submerge into the oceans. Only two continents remain, locked in a state of cold war enforced by the military outpost 'Sentinel', a tiny military fort attacked by regular storms and falling apart due to rust and metal fatigue (TV Tropes, n.d.). The sea fort's setting is akin to a prison for its architecture and mood due to being isolated by infinite amounts of water. The dystopian Earth presented in the film is a 'post-apocalyptic world' (a world that has been destroyed by a natural or man-made apocalypse and the remnant's attempt to survive). The film provides an unnerving experience of the coveted apocalyptic science fiction genre. The film shares conceptual parallels to other acclaimed films from the same sub-genre, such as *2012* (2009), and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). Interestingly, all three films explore the event of the apocalypse in the wake of the world's end due to environmental collapse and fatal increase in ocean levels.



The films parallel Last Sentinel with the theme of worlds being submerged underwater:
2012, and *The Day After Tomorrow*

Source: Rotten Tomatoes & TV Guide

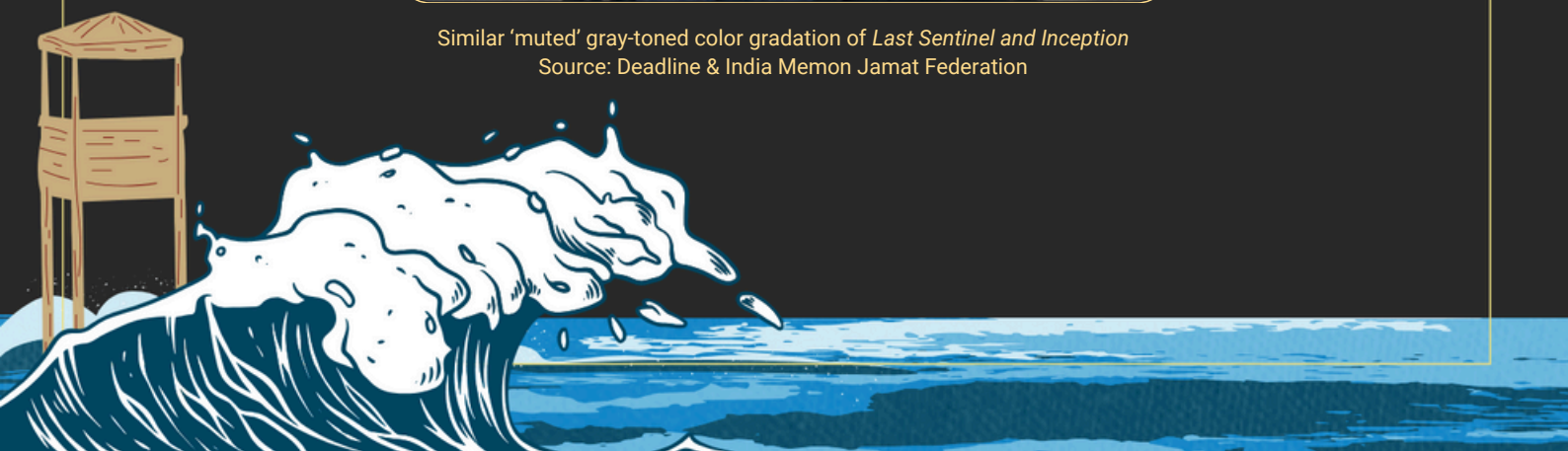




The cinematography of the film is reminiscent of a military fiction film, where there is heavy use of muted colors, presentation of harsh conditions and cool-saturated environments. There is a distinct 'grayish-blue haze' on the film's visuals to represent the harsh conditions of the stranded crew at the port. The cinematography, settings, and pacing of scenes have parallels to the sci-fi blockbuster *Inception* (2014). The port of Sentinel is guarded by a skeletal crew of only four soldiers and their commander Sgt. Hendrichs. Their duration of duty at the port ended three months ago, but the rescue team never arrived for them while they were stuck amidst an endless ocean with no possibilities for communication or aid. The desperate situation of survival and dilemma makes them ponder upon questions such as: "Will they remain trapped in the middle of a never-ending and hostile ocean for an eternity, or has another apocalypse wiped out everyone in their homes?" (TV Tropes, n.d.) The dilemma of an infinite wait or survival against all odds evokes disturbing emotions in the crew.



Similar 'muted' gray-toned color gradation of *Last Sentinel* and *Inception*
Source: Deadline & India Memon Jamat Federation

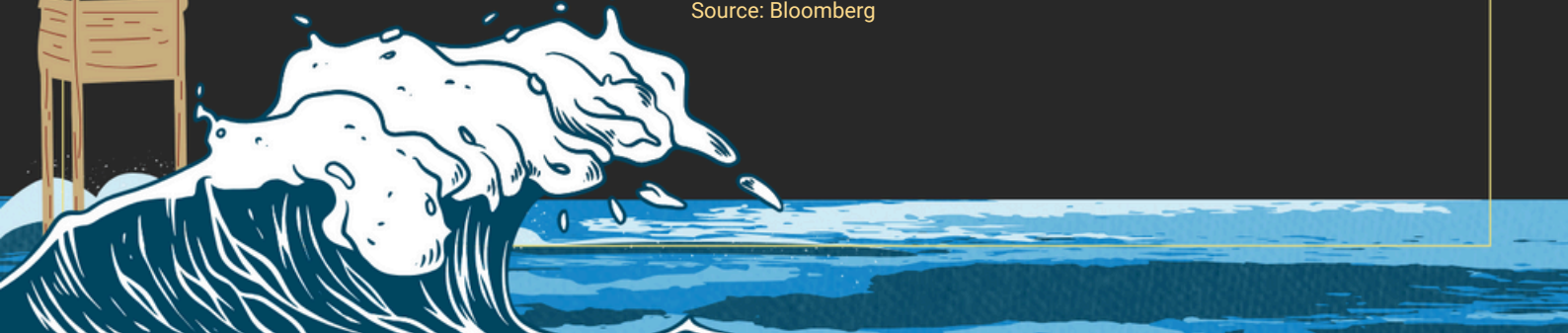




The significant motifs of 'totem' used in both films *Last Sentinel*, and *Inception*
Source: A scene from *Last Sentinel* (01:50:38), and *Medium*



The dark and dystopian world of sci-fi film *Last Sentinel*
Source: Bloomberg





The concept of *Last Sentinel* is highly unique in the realm of science fiction cinema, as it explores a space of time after an apocalypse and before the foreboding next apocalypse that can be either a supernatural, alien or man-made issue. This desperation and the factor of an unknown catastrophe residing in plain sight make up for a fascinating sci-fi thriller. The film also engages in complex emotions and defensive survival instincts through its characters, who are distressed and armed in an enclosed space. The film creates an interesting conundrum of 'dual themes' - darkness and light, evil and good, and war and peace.

The film *Last Sentinel* won applause from global audiences and critics thanks to its impeccable storytelling and critical portrayal of the 'environmental apocalypse'. Film critic Elisabeth Vincentelli from *The New York Times* described the film as "slow-going but fascinating" and that the setting in an isolated, self-contained locale allows the viewer to "witness the mission's drudgery and the paranoia slowly taking over the crew" (Vincentelli, 2023). This factor of slow-pacing of sequences can act as a criticism of the film due to its adverse impact on the engagement of audiences in the sci-fi thriller. Nevertheless, the film has presented a promising future for upcoming inspired sci-fi Estonian films that can evoke development in existing concepts and technologies of filmmaking. Thus, Tanel Toom's *Last Sentinel* is a beacon of hope for the expansion of 'futurism' in modern Eastern European cinema.

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