RECENT ESTONIAN MADNESS

Variously labelled absurdist, grotesque, insane, and unique, Estonian animation is best summed up as... er... Estonian. Difficult to define, it thrashes about like a red herring, taking its first opportunity to escape your grip to rejoin the mad splash. In seeking to tame this cinema into category and submission, you find yourself in a similar predicament to Priit Pärn’s mad rabbits from Night of the Carrots (1998), who vainly plot to bring down aircraft lumbering overhead by thrusting acupuncture pins into voodoo vegetables.

...And therein lies the joy. These animations cling to the edge of narrative, with just enough grip to appease our need for story, and plenty of rope to hang logic. Fresh from a recent dream, fantastic juxtapositions and wonderful scenarios astound, perplex, and fascinate. In a contemporary climate of so much convention and formula, these are welcome anarchic interludes, true to the spirit of animation’s visual and narrative possibilities. Priit Pärn, much-acclaimed patriarch of Estonian animation, suggests that:

*Animation is a much more abstract kind of art than, for example, live-action film. We find it is right to use the strength of this very specific language instead of imitating ‘real’ film... The story is important, but much more important is how the story is told... World in my films is not a real world. I like to tell strange stories in a strange world.*

Chris Robinson, author of Between Genius & Utter Illiteracy: A Story of Estonian Animation (2003), suggests that: ‘the uniqueness of Estonian animators is that they treat adults like children and children like adults. Like that of a child, the Estonian animator’s view of the world is absurd, logical, innocent, and almost always funny’.

There’s a temptation to look for explanations for the peculiar fish that is Estonian animation in tangibles like geography, history, politics, etc.; indeed, much is written about the impact of the Soviet years on Eastern European animation, identified through, for example, allegorical story-telling styles that escaped Soviet censorship and control. Practitioners such as Pärn resist such easy explanations for Estonian animation’s unique approaches to story, yet a history of control by a number of foreign powers over the centuries—in modern times, Sweden, Poland, Germany, and Russia—and close proximity to diverse foreign cultures must go some way towards accounting for the genre’s strong sense of ‘self’. Certainly, Pärn agrees that, as cultural export, ‘animation crosses borders more easily than other kinds of arts and this was important for a small country like Estonia’. (Australia, by contrast, has always had to dig deep to differentiate itself culturally, surrounded as it is by the vast, anonymous blue, and not having had to steel itself against immediate threats to its borders.) A unique language surviving centuries of incursions, and a deep wellspring of Nordic mythology, attest to a strong and vibrant heritage; the ‘Singing
Revolution’ of 1989 comprising a human chain of more than two million people across Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia evidenced a pride and resilience in the cultures of these northern European nations.

In an article in *Animation World Magazine*, Heikki Jokinen describes Estonia as ‘the little big man of animation, a nation of only 1.4 million inhabitants that boasts a long list of well-known artists and films in the world of animation’. Certainly, recent Estonian animation has made a significant impact on the international scene. Pärn offers the usual elusive explanation: ‘No, I can’t explain why we are so good. We just are’.

The animations screening here are sourced predominantly from the country’s two key studios, both based in the capital, Tallinn: Joonisfilm produces primarily 2-D animations, while Nukufilm specialises in puppet techniques. Joonisfilm grew out of Tallinnfilm Studio in 1994; Nukufilm dates back to 1957. The first programme presented here represents a selection of short animations from the last five years, showcasing puppet, hand-drawn, and computer-generated techniques. A special feature of this programme are the newly completed 7x2 minute animated vignettes, based on Estonian poetry, which make up *Must Lagi* (2007). Realised by directors sourced from both studios, and produced at Joonisfilm, this title and the collaborative Joonisfilm feature *Frank and Wendy* (2005), presented in the second session, evidence a creative community of exceptional contemporary talent.

**PETER MOYES**

---