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Newsletter of the Nordic Anthropological Film Association

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2) Review of the NAFA festival in Tartu, Estonia, May 10th-May 16th 2004

By Johannes Sjöberg, FaktaFiktion, Stockholm

Send them into the woods of southern Estonia.

Make them sweat together during a few miles' walk.

Set the black sauna to at least 100 degrees Celsius. Smoke them... slowly.

Rinse them in cold water and stuff them with Estonian food.

Saturate them in home-made alcohol and roast them, while sitting on a log in front of the fire.

As if you didn't know... this is the recipe for turning filmmakers and academics into human beings.

Pille Runnel and Liivo Niglas organised the NAFA festival in Tartu, Estonia, this year. They decided to start the week with an excursion to southern Estonia. The recurrent idea of using the sauna as a 'rite de passage' at the NAFA festivals is a recognised technique to make participants relax together.

This first day of bonding through physical endurance paired with excellent organisation is maybe what made the general ambience so pleasant, during the week of visual culture at the National Museum in Tartu. Ethnographic filmmaker Niglas, and Runnell, researcher at the National Museum had been talking for years about organising a film festival focusing on visual culture. When they were offered to host the NAFA festival in 2004, The National Museum saw its chance to profile itself as a museum engaged in anthropological and ethnological research. Diversifying from being an exhibitor of material culture, as it often has been perceived.

Not surprisingly, observational cinema was the dominant genre of the films screened at the NAFA festival. Gary Kildea gave the tone, starting off the festival with his classic film *'Celso and Cora'*, about a young family, living in a squatter settlement in Manila, Philippines. After the film, Peter Crawford hosted a discussion about Kildea's expression 'respect the moment', among other things. In Crawford's interpretation "*respecting the moments is what enables the film to let the story 'become told'*". According to Crawford the respect for the moment requires, not only an understanding of the people being filmed but also: affection for them. Something that is typical of Kildea's way of filmmaking. I would say that the 'respect of the moment', or at least the ambition to reach it, was the common denominator for many of the films screened at the festival.

The organisers had decided to give as many young ethnographic filmmakers as possible the chance to show their student films. In many ethnographic film festivals, the films are divided into categories; either the films are considered to be student films or to be made by 'grown-ups'. During the festival week in Tartu, there was no such distinction. This gave the young filmmakers the chance to screen their films without the usual preconceptions from the audience. Made as a part of the MA programme in Visual Anthropology, the films from Manchester, Yunnan, Tromsø and Goldsmith; showed that 'respect of the moment' is thriving among the new generation of ethnographic filmmakers.

This focus on films made by students also gave the many young filmmakers from different schools and different years of graduation a chance to express and compare their views on ethnographic filmmaking. Manchester, Yunnan, Tromsø and Goldsmith do not only represent different schools of filmmaking physically, but also theoretically. As students from different schools, we are taught different 'systems of belief', as well as practice. The NAFA festival in Tartu gave us a chance to confront each other and form a more holistic view of the profession.

The main subject of the festival was film about the peoples of northern Siberia. The museum has a long tradition of research on Finno-Ugric peoples. The organisers were looking for anthropological documentaries made by Estonians, which are not always easy to find. Making the Estonian films about northern Siberia into a theme of the festival was a natural choice. A lot of these filmmakers have a background in ethnology and anthropology. This situation probably originated in Lennart Meri's historical commitment to Finno-Ugric peoples in Siberia.

Among other films, we saw *'Autumn on Ob river'* by Janno Simm, *'The Khantys on Pim river – a new generation?'* by Anzori Barkalaja and Veiko Taluste and *'Yuri Vella's world'* by Liivo Niglas. After the screening, the round table discussion was hosted by Eva Toulouze. The three young filmmakers had all spent an extensive time in the field, starting out as travellers/adventurers/students of ethnology. Gradually becoming more committed to their field, they gained a growing empathy for the people they had spent their time with in Siberia.

Since the beginning of the 1990s many of these Finno-Ugric peoples had become victims of an expanding oil industry in Russia. The filmmakers used their cameras to display the changing conditions for these peoples – documenting their lives as well as pointing out injustices.

Mark Soosar's film '*Father, son and holy Torum*' was different from the other films about Siberia. It was masterly told with a strong artistic voice. The film provoked questions on which artistic means can be useful in visual anthropology. According to the director, the artistic means used in this film were meant to attract an audience that would normally not watch ethnographic films. Among some of the anthropological filmmakers, these motives were seen as controversial, opinions that were expressed in the discussion after the film.

NAFA is known to be a good climate for interesting discussions, though the questions asked to the filmmakers, seemed to be a bit more polite than usual this year. NAFA is a 'small town' compared to the 'cities' of Göttingen and RAI, among others. This means NAFA sometimes also holds the other characteristics of small communities – after a while everybody knows everybody.

The parallel screenings of the big festivals tend to create a certain amount of anonymity among the visitors. Since we very rarely have parallel screenings at NAFA, it's easier to form close bonds among the participants – and as a consequence: social control. People notice if you don't watch their films due to yesterday's hangover...

The NAFA festival in Tartu 2004 ended with the beautiful film '*Master of Lakes*'. The main protagonist of the film struggles to create a chain of lakes for symphony orchestras in the Estonian countryside. I met the director Andres Sööt over a drink at the party that concluded the festival. The party was held at an old Soviet military base, which gave an historical aspect to the whole event. Director Andres Soot also added an historical flavour (he looks a lot younger than he is). During his forty years as a professional documentary filmmaker, he has seen his country be subjected to huge historical changes. For me, the struggle of the protagonist in Andres' film '*Master of Lakes*' is symbolical for the struggle of many other Estonian visionaries... like filmmakers... after the downfall of the USSR.

When the Soviet Union still ruled Estonia, young filmmakers like Andres were sent to Moscow to study film. After they had graduated many of them were funded by central institutions. Estonian freedom also meant independence for filmmakers, for better... and for worse.

Today Estonian documentary filmmakers are educated in Tallinn. They have a hard time obtaining funding after their education. This is true for the rest of the world as well, but Estonians also have to adapt to rapidly changing political and economical situations. The demands of the new market economy have created a documentary film style inspired by television from Western Europe and the USA, a genre that is sometimes quite shallow.

During he festival I heard many similar complaints about young Estonian filmmakers not using their freedom of expression fully. But I am sure the situation will change - the staff of the National Museum is already discussing next year's week of visual culture in Tartu.