

Tallinn

Stories of Pictures and Pictures of Stories

Jüri Soolep

In September 2021, just when the world was slowly opening up again after the Covid-19 pandemic, the Department of Architecture of the Estonian Art Academy EKA hosted a PhD training school in Tallinn. A key topic of the training school was how local stories are connected to myths that, in other forms, also exist elsewhere.

On the Campidoglio Hill in Rome, we can find the sculpture of the river god Nile. The sculpture was made around 160 AD and comes from the vast stores of the Pope. Michelangelo set it atop the hill around 1536. It has several attributes, and interests us because the River Nile is all about the flood. Nile is reclining on the statue of the Sphinx, decrypting its essence and name. He has a clay tablet in one hand, looking after the geometry that is to be used to revive field markers after the Nile's annual floods. It also looks like a smartphone. In the other hand the river god holds the *Cornu Copiae* – the Horn of Plenty – so we see devastation and plenitude in one dialectical twist. The Horn of Plenty is one of those images that often migrate through the whole of European culture, in fine arts as much as in architecture. It exemplifies certain persistent meaning continuities, which migrate through different images. I have called them certain



Fig. 1. River God Nile. Photo: Jüri Soolep.

meaning continua, as certain visual, conceptual or even formal elements constitute a traceable historical shadow behind the images. Nowadays, particularly due to the development of digital networks, the amount of images around us has multiplied manifold.

In this contribution, such dynamic and varied meanings of poetic images will be discussed in relation to three particular local stories of the city of Tallinn. The stories discussed are chosen because they present meaning continuities that are quite persistent and stay with us for a long time. The first is about the Old Man from Lake Ülemiste. The second is about the Town Hall Square pharmacy and the pharmacist's able apprentice. It is a modern fairy tale of medieval Tallinn by the Estonian literary writer and scholar Jaan Kross. The third story is about a communist monument that was removed in 2007 and caused Russians to riot in Tallinn. For this contribution, we will disregard the political consequences of these events and focus on the meaning cores of these stories, that still can be distilled from the images concerned. While the Old Man from the lake and the Bronze Soldier are rather depressing stories, the fairytale of the pharmacy offers a brighter image of Tallinn, not in the least due to the beautiful illustrations by Estonian artist Edgar Valter, one of my favorite illustrators from my childhood.

Flood Stories

The image of Nile presented, as the title image already hinted at, the theme of the flood. The flood is a universal archetype that is currently gaining attention, as risks of flooding are becoming more common worldwide due to climate change. Ancient flood myths include that of the Egyptian megaflood, with the revenge of the goddess Hathor who turned into a lioness and killed most of the people; the Sumerian flood and water epics; and of course the Biblical legend of Noah's Ark. In the myth of Sumer the fundamental element of starting the world and life is depicted as water. In the British Museum and in the Altes Museum we can see several gods with water

flowing from their shoulders. The water is full of fish and the water gods deal with an eagle who stole the tablets of destiny. In the book of Genesis everything starts with the creation of empty space, which is somehow parallel to primordial waters: 'Darkness upon the abyss' and 'Spirit of God bore upon the water'. And then water is introduced into the world, 'parting between water and water'. It is worth mentioning that in this Greek text it is not water, but moisture that follows primordial water. In Berlin we can see a huge basin, with the main god depicted at the centre. Out of his shoulders the waters emerge and are on both sides enjoyed by priests, probably disguised as fish. The basin also reminds us of the baptizing basins in which one is submerged and rises reborn into Jesus. The original baptizing process demands full body submersion. This is symbolic creation, death and rebirth.

The Old Man from Lake Ülemiste

Lake Ülemiste is located quite close to Old Tallinn, high on the limestone cliff running along the northern Estonian coast. Several stories are connected to the lake, most of which are about a godly figure that lives in the lake and emerges from the water in unknown intervals. He comes down to the city and asks anyone he meets: 'Is Tallinn built already?' It also goes that everybody already knows what they should say: 'It is not ready yet!' Otherwise, if the city of Tallinn were complete, the Old Man from the lake would drown the city with a flood from Ülemiste.

The story of the Old Man from the lake was recorded first in 1866 by Fridrich Reinhold Kreutzwald. It seems to be an older myth, but Kreutzwald was the first to turn it into a modern fairy tale. Besides, there are other morbid stories of people who are stuck in the ice on the lake and have to make a deal with the Old Man, to not drown. So the lake has a sacred allusions connected to it. In the final version by Kreutzwald, the evil Old Man comes from the lake to find out if Tallinn is ready and everybody needs to answer that it is not. The story, at this stage, did not have any illustrations.

Like Vitruvius's book on the art of building, which didn't have any illustrations either, every generation has illustrated it anew, offering an intriguing range of depictions of the same story.

In 1946 Debora Vaarandi turned the legend of Ülemiste into a long poem about the Old Man from the lake and a young communist builder, illustrated by Asta Vender and Olev Soans, and published in 1952.¹ The next edition was published in the 1970s, and was illustrated by Viive Tolli with a totally different mood and graphic signature. Quite recently another novel was also based on this legend, and lavishly illustrated by Jaan Tammsaar.²

In Debora Vaarandi's communist poem, the Old Man from the lake is transformed into a comical figure, re-educated into the communist utopia of a future city. He has lost his mythical malicious character, and reminds us of a nice old man, talking to young people. He even forgets to ask the strategic question about the readiness of the city. Finally the Old Man even disappears, as if the communist propaganda had dissolved his evil myth. It should also be pointed out that recent studies have shown how Vaarandi actually took active part in communist deportations in 1949.

This version with the young city builder of the communist era is the perfect imagination of communist propaganda that started immediately in 1945, after the second Soviet occupation of Estonia. The young city builder wears a military uniform, depicted on the cover illustration (Fig. 2). Transforming into a communist society meant that all people, including school children, college students and pioneers, had to wear uniforms. When I entered first grade in 1970, I had to wear the uniform, but it had been tailored to look more civil than military. Only the red flag and neck scarf remained from the communist organization. It took about 20 years for the military iconography to gradually disappear from our clothes. The actual illustrations of the 1952 book probably depict the Tallinn Technical Railway School uniform. The school had been in Tallinn since 1880 and was taken over by the Soviets as



Fig. 2. The book by Debora Vaarandi, 1951. Photo: Jüri Soolep.

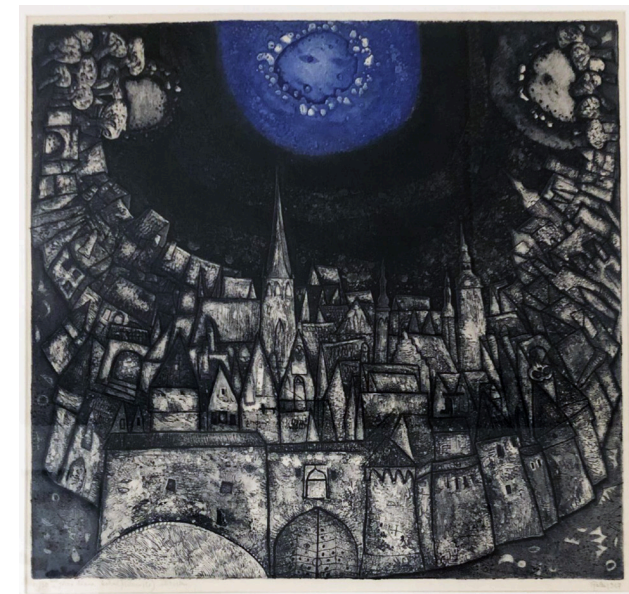


Fig.3. Viive Tolli, The Lake upon the City, 1967. Screen shot: <https://www.osta.ee/v-tolli-jarv-linna-kohal-161192441.html>



Fig. 4. CThe book by Arvo Valton, 2008.
Photo: Jüri Soolep.



Fig. 5. The book by Debora Vaarandi, illustrated by Viive Tolli, 1975. Photo: Jüri Soolep.



Fig. 6. The spread from the book by Jaan Kross, 1973. Photo: Jüri Soolep.

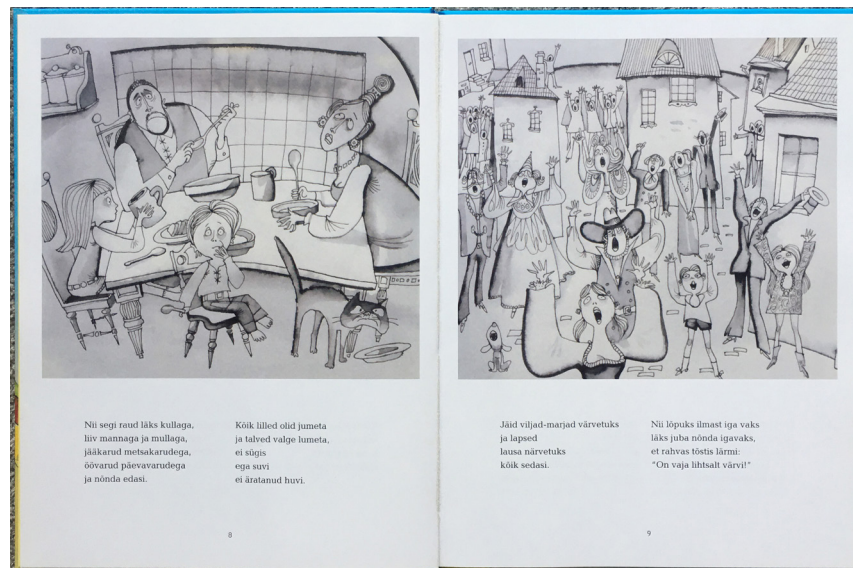
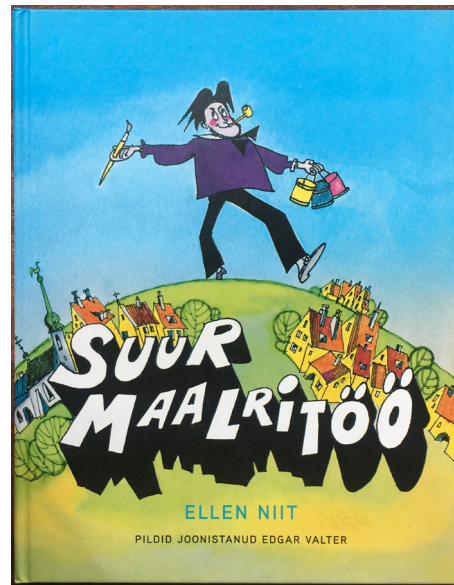


Fig. 7+8. The book cover and spread by Ellen Niit, 2020. Photos: Jüri Soolep.

the railway school. The railway remained the main military infrastructure until the end of the Soviet regime.

In the 1975 version, the imagery changed entirely, although the text remained the same and was used for the new publication, which also included the 1866 story.³ It looks as if a whole new venture was started to publish new illustrations by a well-known graphic artist of that time. Viive Tolli had worked on the Ülemiste story for at least ten years before the opportunity came to use these illustrations in a book. Some of these preparatory sketches are extremely interesting as they depict the old city of Tallinn on the shore of the lake, or around and on both sides of the lake (Fig. 3). The drawing can be seen as the sublimation of the closed sea-shore of Tallinn in Soviet times, but we do not know exactly what ideas were behind all of these drawings. The illustrations in the book juxtapose the old and the new. In the first illustrations the old city has not yet been reconstructed, but by the end parts of the old city are all ready and festive looking. Debora Vaarandi's communist propaganda has disappeared and become just a background to the illustrations.

The most recent story about Lake Ülemiste comes from contemporary writer Arvo Valton. The protagonist Vambo is a fisherman who lives in a small shed at the lake. Like his father, who drowned, Vambo has an agreement with the Old Man from the lake, which ensures him good luck with fishing. In return he must also become the citizen of the lake. There is a love story with a young noble lady from the city, who is saved from drowning by Vambo. The story of obstacles between lovers is situated in the medieval Tallinn, and ends with a collective suicide (Fig. 4).

The Story of the Pharmacy on Town Hall Square

The second theme is a modern fairy tale of medieval Tallinn, first published in 1973,⁴ written by Jaan Kross, who is also the author of several historical novels, such as *Between Three Plaques*. The story is richly illustrated

by Edgar Valter, a celebrated Estonian artist and illustrator. The illustrations transform the story into a graphic novel about Mart, the pharmacist's apprentice. The pharmacy has been on Town Hall Square since 1422, and is still there today. The story also suggests that we walk on the same streets for hundreds of years and are therefore connected through a common space that has seen better and worse times. The story is about love between Mart and the mayor's daughter, who is sick. Mart has to help with the medicine because the pharmacist cannot do it himself. Instead of using awful drugs, Mart uses marzipan and everybody is happy in the end. Mart and marzipan are the recipe for love and health.

Here we could also look at another graphic story by Edgar Valter: a poem by Ellen Niit, published in 1971, is about a world without colours.⁵ Suddenly, a hippy-like painter appears and starts to colour everything. Only now, far from my childhood, I see the political connotations implicit in the illustrations: the family sitting around the table with nothing to eat, the bleak look of the city in shades of grey as it was in Soviet times. Then of course, the great artist comes with colour and gayness and a happy new world is born.

The Story of the Bronze Soldier

Leading us into politics again, our third theme is more radical. In April 1945, at the end of the Second World War, 12 Soviet soldiers and officers were buried on Tõnismäe Hill in Tallinn. Their dead bodies were brought together from many different places. The circumstances and times of their deaths have remained obscure. It is quite likely that they did not perish in active combat.

In May 1945, a design competition was announced for a monument and its surrounding space on the burial site at Tõnismäe, which was to be called 'Liberators' Square'. Initial plans were to erect the monument on Victory Square, the present day Liberty Square, from which the sculpture of Peter I had been removed after Estonia won its independence. The new plan for



Fig. 9. The monument by architect Arnold Hoffard-Alas and Enn Roos in 1947. Now in the Military Cemetery. Photo: Jüri Soolep.



Fig. 10 + 11. Screen shot from the film: Bronze Night: the Russian Riot in Tallinn, Urmas E. Liiv, Tallinn 2007.

the monument was prepared according to drawings by architect Arnold Hoffard-Alas and the sculpture for the monument was made by Enn Roos in 1947. As Hoffard-Alas's student Tõnu Virve wrote, the conceptual basis of the monument is a portal to the realm of the dead.⁶ Indeed, people familiar with the history of architecture may recognize the characteristic portal usually built in front of Egyptian temples, known as a pylon, in the proportions and pilasters of the limestone abutment of this monument.

The liberators' monument was a mandatory urban altar in all Soviet cities. Its supposed meaning, as stated in the conditions of the competition, was to represent the growth of patriotic feeling in the Estonian people and their battle against German fascists. The monument was also expected to represent friendship between different nations and the memory of the homeland's brave sons, who gave their lives in battle against the enemy.⁷

Regardless of the apparent atheism of Soviet power, the square was a highly charged sacred space. This became particularly apparent after the eternal flame was added in 1964. A short gas flame rose from a small angular pit at the centre of a bronze five-pointed star. The eternal flame is one of the oldest metaphors for the remembrance of war in Indo-European culture – inextinguishable honour – *kleos aftiton*.⁸ Originally, a composition with five-pointed stars and the eternal flame was placed on the back of the pylon as a bronze relief. The place's ritual was connected to compulsory political liturgy on ⁹ May and on 22 September (the official date of the end of the Second World War in the USSR, and the official anniversary of the capture of Tallinn respectively).

The vegetation and the landscaping around the monument have changed several times throughout the course of its existence. Only the evergreen trees have retained their initial position. In the period 2003-2007, the forgotten monument was gradually energized again. It was seen as a forpost of Soviet propaganda of Victory Day, militarism and the occupation of Eastern

Europe. Meetings of war veterans at Tõnismäe began gathering steam again in 2003. This began to be referred to as the strengthening of Russian identity, part of which was actually hostility towards the Estonian state. These gatherings became quite large by 2006 and clearly opposed Estonian independence. The gatherings took place under Soviet red flags and imperial Russian flags.

Fearing the potential for a demonstration arising from the commemoration of Victory Day, the Estonian government dismantled the monument in April 2007 and reburied (or sent to Russia) the remains of the 12 dead soldiers and officers. The monument itself was taken to a military cemetery less than 2 kilometres away. The defenders of the monument led by the Night Watch organized a demonstration in Tallinn's Old Town and at Tõnismäe, which boiled over into mass unrest and violence that lasted for two nights. The group Night Watch – Nochnoi Dozor – was the organized activator of the iconic space of the Bronze Soldier.⁹ It is quite probable that this name itself is taken from the Timur Bekmambetov film *НОЧНОЙ ДОЗОР* – *Night Watch*.¹⁰ Let us consider what kind of iconography their self-identification is founded on.

Bekmambetov's film *НОЧНОЙ ДОЗОР* was completed in 2004 at the Pervõi Kanal film studio, which belonged to the Russian government. The film was based on the book of the same name by Sergei Lukyanenko. Both the film and the book proved to be very popular in Russia and abroad. The film's action takes place in contemporary Moscow, which is a battleground in the struggle between good and evil. The film is made in a 'magical realist' style, where everything seems ordinary, yet events themselves are totally unreal. To a certain extent, it resembles the language used in Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*, where everything is also ordinary and has acquired an unworldly meaning, or the atmosphere of Mikhail Bulgakov's book *Master and Margarita*. The film's plot is quite simple: it is the personal drama of Anton, the main character, in his struggle between good and evil. The Day



Fig. 12. The cover of the DVD of *Night Watch*, Timur Bekmambetov, 2004.

and Night Watch have agreed on a temporary truce, which is ruined when the Great Prophet is born – the Other, or Anton’s unborn son Yegor, whom Anton is willing to sacrifice in order to win back his unfaithful wife. By the end of the film, things go wrong and his son joins the forces of evil. In the second part, the entire process returns to the beginning.

While the plot might not be very important from the point of view of this contribution, it is more interesting to study the representation of good and evil and the *imagosphere* that is depicted in the film. I suspect this is rather difficult to decipher for people who have not come across the Soviet sign system. Let us consider it more closely.

The dichotomy of good and evil is expressed in everything visible, starting with the location. The forces of evil reside and operate in the Kosmos Hotel, which was already a gathering place for high-class prostitutes in the Soviet era. Luxurious banquets and receptions take place in the hotel. The forces of evil’s female hero performs there, at a huge rock concert. The forces of good’s headquarters are in an office building with a granite sign on the door that reads: *ГОПЧБЕТ (Gorsvet)*. Above the name is the Russian coat-of-arms with the two-headed eagle, which connects its image with the state. *Gorsvet* is an abbreviation of the Russian-language expression *gorodskoi svet* – light of the city. It is just one letter away from the former term *ГОПЧОБЕТ*. This means *gorodskoi sovet* – city council. This is the Soviet-era municipal government, which carried out the city’s administration in accordance with the general guidance of the city’s communist party committee. Thus, the forces of good’s headquarters have multiple meanings and is simultaneously the municipal government, a public bureau and a state structure. In addition, it is also a ‘closed type of joint stock company’. The municipal administration office has its own ‘information centre’ that watches tomorrow’s news (via website Regnum.ru – one of the most reactionary news agencies, later bought by the Russian state) and prevents accidents. The leader of the forces of good’s office is recognizably similar to the office of

a Soviet director. There is a set of telephones on a long T-shaped meeting table. Everything is a little bit worn but is prominently ‘Soviet era chic’. At the same time, the chief of the forces of evil sits in the hotel playing video games and does business via a satellite telephone.

The forces of good’s leader, Geser (evidently an allusion to the name Caesar, tsar), is dressed in a white shirt and a suit. His antipode Zavulon (with a biblical theme, the Jewish patriarch or ruler Zabulon, who operated in the vicinity of Nazareth) wears an undershirt and a woollen cap (like petty criminals from the Soviet era, working as dealers and illegal money changers – *fartshovshiki* or the opposite – a high class businessman’s designer suit. In the end credits we also find out that Geser had been a deputy minister of the USSR (*zam-ministra pri CCCP*).

The dichotomy continues in automobiles, women and clothing. Women from the forces of good are homely, dressed in simple clothing or work clothes. Olga, for instance, has been a bewitched owl for 100 years, and does not know how to dress in modern clothes. The women of evil, however, are unattainable sex idols in short skirts and high heels, *femme fatales* with satanic faces. The forces of good go about in wadded jackets and overalls with the name of their firm *ГОПЧБЕТ* on their backs. They are clearly from the lower working class – *vatniki*. The evil guys wear designer clothes or expensive brands of sportswear.

The automobiles used by the forces of good are especially nostalgic and patriotic. They are Soviet lorries made (presumably) from converted GAZ-53 vehicles, with magical powers to jump and accelerate to the maximum. Lorries are painted yellow, like Soviet gas emergency vehicles. Even the number on the side of the lorry resembles the word GAZ, and connects them in spirit with the Russian government’s media and economic *giant* *ГАЗПРОМ* – *Gasprom*. The forces of evil drive expensive Western European sports cars.

With the recent Ukraine invasion in mind, all of this looks like a mild mythopoetic experiment in which Estonia just got away with a slightly uncomfortable surprise, but actually this was a deliberate policy, a testing of countermeasures to see how far the global community will allow Russia to move. It was soon complemented by the invasion of Georgia in 2008, and that of Crimea and Donbas in 2014. After the Ukraine invasion everybody understood that the answer to Russian pictures and stories was non-existent and led to real wars and loss of life.

These were the local stories of pictures and pictures of stories in Tallinn. The images carry different stories. Sometimes stories change with the images that are added to them. Sometimes it is stories that change the images that are used to illustrate them. Images, like stories, are never neutral – they carry complex value systems. The paradox enhanced by Digital Reality is that these value systems can only partly be orchestrated by the author or interpreter. Very often they go deeper into the archetypal levels of the human mind and tell the stories, both good and evil, of the places and people.

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- 9 Now editing the texts 15 years later, we can recognize the main organizers of the unrests in active imperial policy of Russia: Dimitri Linter visited Riga in 2014 as an official assistant of Vladimir Medinsky, the Russian minister of culture. A month before that he visited Crimea and participated in the conference with mental leaders of unrests in east of Ukraine: Sergei Glazev, Alexander Dugin and Igor Strelkov. Dimitri Linter was presented as a member of Novorossia. Online: rus.delfi.ee/archive/print.php?id=69994159.
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