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Title	Transcending 'Cold Intimacies' in Veiko Õunpuu's Works
Type	Article
URL	<a href="https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/15981/">https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/15981/</a>
DOI	/10.1515/bsmr-2017-0004
Date	2016
Citation	Mazierska, Ewa Hanna and Naripea, Eva (2016) Transcending 'Cold Intimacies' in Veiko Õunpuu's Works. <i>Baltic Screen Media Review</i> , 4 (1). pp. 60-87. ISSN 2346-5522
Creators	Mazierska, Ewa Hanna and Naripea, Eva

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. /10.1515/bsmr-2017-0004

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Article

# Transcending 'Cold Intimacies' in Veiko Õunpuu's Works



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DOI: [10.1515/bsmr-2017-0004](https://doi.org/10.1515/bsmr-2017-0004)

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## ABSTRACT

**This article examines five films by Veiko Õunpuu, Estonia's most renowned contemporary director – *Empty* (*Tühirand*, Estonia, 2006), *Autumn Ball* (*Sügisball*, Estonia, 2007), *Temptations of St Tony* (*Püha Tõnu kiusamine*, Estonia/Finland/Sweden, 2009), *Free Range: Ballad on Approving of the World* (*Free Range: ballaad maailma heakskiitmisest*, Estonia, 2013) and *Roukli* (Estonia, 2015), focusing on his representations of neoliberalism and especially its effect on the emotional and intimate lives of the characters. We argue that the characters of his films typically reject the conventional romance promoted by neoliberal discourses, including Hollywood cinema, yet this does not make them happy, but disoriented and restless. The repudiation of 'emotional capitalism' also pertains to the way Õunpuu's films are conceived and executed. Most importantly, he resists the conventions of Hollywood cinema, including a classical script and happy ending, and also sets and shoots his films in peripheral places. Our main theoretical framework is the concept of 'emotional capitalism' as elaborated by Eva Illouz.**

## INTRODUCTION

Veiko Õunpuu has been directing films for a decade, rising from an unknown 'amateur' to become an internationally renowned auteur. This article looks at his five cinematic works<sup>1</sup> – *Empty* (*Tühirand*, Estonia, 2006), *Autumn Ball* (*Sügisball*, Estonia, 2007), *Temptations of St Tony* (*Püha Tõnu kiusamine*, Estonia/Finland/Sweden, 2009), *Free Range: Ballad on Approving of the World* (*Free Range: ballaad maailma*

*heakskiitmisest*, Estonia, 2013) and *Roukli* (Estonia, 2015). To our knowledge, this is the first attempt to discuss Õunpuu's filmic oeuvre in its entirety. Aside from attempting to shed some light on his approach to film-making in general, we will analyse Õunpuu's works individually, by concentrating on representations of intimate relationships. More often than not, the private affairs in these films tend to come across as lacking affection. We suggest that this could be seen as Õunpuu's critique of the political and economic circumstances under which the characters of the films operate, most importantly, the rampant neoliberalism that dominates post-Soviet Estonian society. Indeed, Õunpuu has never made a secret of

1 True, for the sake of the comprehensiveness of Õunpuu's journey as an *auteur* one should not discard his version of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's play *Garbage, the City and Death*, produced in Estonian at the NO99 theatre in 2010. However, we decided to concentrate on his screen works, not least because their reproducibility makes them accessible to wider audiences.

his intense dissatisfaction with the neoliberal regime, a discontent that is rooted in his strongly leftist worldview. A theoretical framework that aims to highlight the pitfalls of the capitalist social formation from the leftist perspective also informs the following discussion. In particular, our starting point lies in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' observations concerning the influence of capitalism on family and emotional life, developed and modified by authors such as Catherine Hakim (2011) and especially Eva Illouz (2007, 2012). To very briefly summarise the latter's complex sociological study regarding the notable shifts in the structure of intimate relationships over the past century, Illouz proposes that capitalist institutions, technologies and discourses have rationalised and commodified emotions and selfhood, which, in turn, has 'contributed to creating a suffering self' (Illouz 2007: 108–109). It is precisely these 'suffering selves' that inhabit the very centre of Öunpuu's cinematic universes, craving for true emotional intimacy that keeps slipping out of their reach.

### **EROTIC CAPITAL, EMOTIONAL CAPITALISM AND THERAPEUTIC CULTURE**

In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels observed that capital transforms every aspect of human life, including the most intimate one.

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors,' and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment.' It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of Philistine sentimentalism in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth

into exchange value, and in place of the numberless infeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – free trade. [---] The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced family relation to a mere money relation. (Marx, Engels 1988: 211–212)

This fragment declares that there is no escape from the power of capitalism, even in the privacy of one's home and body. The production of commodities affects the production of subjectivities; the (macro) ideology conditions individual (micro) worldviews. Marx had a negative attitude to this situation, as he regarded capitalism as a deeply immoral system.

Many authors have agreed with Marx's views that the capitalist economy and ideology influences the way people behave in their intimate relationships. However, not everybody sees this as being a negative. In *Honey Money*, Catherine Hakim takes the capitalist status quo as given. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's argument that the concept of capital should be used to account for other human assets besides strictly economic ones, i.e. also the cultural and social ones, Hakim introduces the concept of 'erotic capital'. This is understood as 'a combination of aesthetic, visual, physical, social and sexual attractiveness to other members of your society, and especially to members of the opposite sex, in all social contexts' (Hakim 2011: 17). Thus, erotic capital can be monetised and exchanged for more tangible goods, such as money and power. This commercialisation of the erotic has profound consequences for all strata of society. The rich can multiply their monetary capital by using their erotic capital, for example, by wooing their clients, while the poor are sometimes in such a precarious position that they have no other option than to engage in sex work, often risking their health or even lives. Hakim's theory is closely linked to neoliberalism, because, as David Harvey argues, under this system any

kind of good can be turned into an instrument of economic speculation (Harvey 2005: 160–162). Yet, rather than lamenting that eroticism and sex have a market value, which Marxists do, regarding money as an instrument of violence, Hakim's principal interest is to discover how to make them work better for those living under capitalism. In his films, Õunpuu also observes the commodification of human relationships, caused or facilitated by capitalism, but like Marx, he sees this trend as de-humanising.

While Marx observed the marketisation of personal life, Eva Illouz noticed a seemingly opposing, but in fact complementary trend, namely capitalism becoming 'emotional'. In her *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, she argues that the year 1909 can be considered a turning point in American emotional culture. In 1909, Sigmund Freud gave five lectures on psychoanalysis at Clark University. The lectures had a major impact on the formation of the 'therapeutic emotional style', a dominant force on the American (and, we suggest, on the Western) cultural landscape throughout the 20th century (Illouz 2007: 5ff) which was spread widely by films and advice literature (Illouz 2007: 9). Illouz uses the term 'therapeutic emotional style'

for ways in which twentieth-century culture became 'preoccupied' with emotional life – its etiology and morphology – and devised specific 'techniques' – linguistic, scientific, interactional – to apprehend and manage these emotions. Modern emotional style has been shaped mostly (albeit not exclusively) by the language of therapy which emerged in a relatively short period running from the First World War to the Second World War. (Illouz 2007: 6)

She cites several 'key ideas and cultural motives' (Illouz 2007: 7–9) of the 'psychoanalytical imagination' that were crucial to the making of the new 'therapeutic' emotional life, such as the nuclear family as the point

of origin for the modern, post-Victorian, self; the 'uneventful' everyday life as the *locus* of that self, which resulted in the boundaries between 'normality' and 'pathology' being blurred and a new kind of normality being posited; and, perhaps most importantly for this argument, the centrality of sexuality as 'a chiefly linguistic affair, something to be achieved after a considerable amount of conceptual clarification and verbalization' (Illouz 2007: 9). The importance of verbalised communication deserves special attention in relation to Õunpuu, in particular in regard to his approach to the filmmaking process to which we return below, but also because his films appear to prioritise non-verbal modes of expression, such as space. This is also why the following pages summarise Illouz's ideas about the significance of the verbal aspect of emotional capitalism at some length.

According to Illouz, the new emphasis on the verbalisation of emotions affected not only domestic/intimate relationships. It also reshaped the workplace when clinical psychologists, 'many of whom were inspired by Freudian psychodynamic views ... were mobilized by the corporation to help formulate needed guidelines for the new task of management' – to increase productivity and facilitate discipline (Illouz 2007: 12). In particular, Illouz cites the importance of Elton Mayo, an Australian (self-assigned) psychologist, industrial researcher and organizational theorist, who conducted his famous Hawthorne experiments between 1924 and 1927, which led him to conclude that 'productivity increased if work relationships contained care and attention to workers' feelings' (Illouz 2007: 12). As a result of Mayo's work, the 'languages' of emotionality and productive efficiency started to interlace and influenced each other (Illouz 2007: 14). For managers and corporation owners, this psychological discourse promised to increase profits and to neutralise class struggles 'by casting them in the benign language of emotions and personality' (Illouz 2007: 17). For workers, it carried the promise of democracy and success based on their personalities rather than

their social status – that is, a certain kind of equality, including in terms of gender (Illouz 2007: 17–18). However, this approach obscured the fact that individual progress is largely shaped by factors beyond personal control, placing responsibility for failure on the individual.

Another important notion in this discussion is the concept of ‘communicative ethic’. This ‘cultural model’, as Illouz terms it, prescribes the linguistic model of communication as ‘a technology of self-management relying extensively on language and on the proper management of emotions’ (Illouz 2007: 19). The ultimate goal is to earn social recognition and achieve success (inside the corporation as well as in personal life), as well as ‘to back up one’s sense of self and identity’ (Illouz 2007: 21).

Illouz observes that in the workplace, the therapeutic culture and communicative ethic, which blurred gender boundaries by introducing and universalising the ‘feminine’ attention to feelings, led to the ‘softening’ of the workplace, facilitating a sense of social and gender equality, even if failing to erase ‘the harsh and often brutal reality of the corporate world and of male domination of women’ (Illouz 2007: 23).

While Illouz suggests that the subjection of workers to this kind of emotional regime made wage-earners – from the blue-collar labour force to the managerial class – somewhat happier and increased their sense of empowerment, we argue that this shift to the therapeutic culture has in fact resulted in the workers being less likely to unite against their exploitation by the forces of capitalism (Mazierska 2015). Illouz’s conclusions are largely based on American corporate capitalism in the early 20th century. However, by the turn of the millennium, the Western hemisphere in general and Europe in particular had also experienced the Fordist-Keynesian or embedded liberalist paradigm and the subsequent post-Fordist neoliberal system.<sup>2</sup>

2 For instance, Andrés Solimano defines four key phases of capitalism (‘economic eras’) – liberal (laissez-faire) capitalism (1815–1914, including the first wave of globalisation beginning in ca. 1870),

We agree with neo-Marxian authors such as David Harvey who have vividly demonstrated that this brought about an ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2005: 160–165), which basically signalled a (re)turn to 19th-century laissez-faire principles (that is, to the phase of ‘primitive’ or ‘original accumulation’ defined by Karl Marx, see Marx [1887] 1976: 873–876) in a radicalised form, severely curtailing the liberties and rights of the workforce, which has certainly made them not happier, but more miserable. Moreover, Harvey suggests that ‘some of [the] most vicious and inhumane manifestations [of accumulation of dispossession] are in the most vulnerable and degraded regions within uneven geographical development’ (Harvey 2003: 173) – an observation especially pertinent in the context of a study of a peripheral culture such as Estonia, which is characterised by a striking degree of socio-geographical inequality. Yet despite the fact that we do not agree with Illouz regarding the problem of the increased happiness of the workers, her idea of the increased importance of ‘communication’, especially in terms of verbalisation, is significant for the discussion of Õunpuu’s approach to filmmaking.

David Harvey has also argued that the process of neoliberalisation has deeply affected not only the economic and professional realm, but also the ‘ways of life and thought, reproductive activities ... and habits of the heart’ (Harvey 2005: 3). It is here that Illouz’s take on the therapeutic culture becomes especially relevant. According to Illouz, in private life, the therapeutic culture, shaped by discourses of psychology and second-wave feminism (incidentally, the later part of which coincided with the rise of neoliberalism), called for a modern ideal of intimacy based on ‘equality, fairness, neutral procedures, emotional communication, sexuality, overcoming and expressing

shattered with the outbreak of World War I and followed by more than twenty years of turmoil, both in economy and politics; regulated capitalism, also dubbed the era of ‘shared prosperity’ or the ‘Bretton Woods system’ (1944–early 1970s); and neoliberal capitalism (mid-1970s – present, including neoliberal globalisation since the 1980s) (Solimano 2014: 3–5, 88).

hidden emotions, and centrality of *linguistic* self-expression' (Illouz 2007: 29; our emphasis). Yet Illouz argues that, while the combined efforts of psychology and liberal feminism 'forcefully aimed to free intimate relationships from the long shadow of power and asymmetry', their demand for equality, fair procedures and the recognition of women's basic rights in fact resulted in 'a vast process of rationalization of intimate relations' (Illouz 2007: 30). This rationalisation meant that 'intimate life and emotions are made into measurable and calculable objects, to be captured in quantitative statements' (Illouz 2007: 32). In an effort to manage them, emotions are 'locked' into literacy, and they become 'definite discrete entities ... trapped inside the self', 'objects to be observed and manipulated' as well as controlled (Illouz 2007: 33) both by individuals and social factors. In addition, the communicative ethos demands that, in order to be managed, emotions need to be verbalised, expressed and discussed in *an emotionally and linguistically neutral manner*, which should guarantee the clarity of meaning (Illouz 2007: 34–35). Ultimately, suggests Illouz, 'relationships have been transformed into cognitive objects that can be compared with each other and are susceptible to cost–benefit analysis', into 'objects that can be traded and exchanged' (Illouz 2007: 36).

In *Why Love Hurts*, Illouz expands her discussion on the decisive impact of new technologies, primarily the Internet, on contemporary intimate life and 'romantic imagination'. Particularly pertinent to our discussion is her suggestion that web-based technology 'dis-embodies and *textualizes* encounters, *linguistic* exchange being the means to produce psychological intimate knowledge' (Illouz 2012: 228; our emphases). The 'traditional' (i.e. 19th-century) romantic imagination relied on the body, retrospective imagination ('an imagination which tries to capture *in absentia* the sensory and bodily affects provoked by the real bodily presence of another' [Illouz 2012: 229]), intuitive judgments and idealisation. In contrast, 'Internet imagination' is 'domi-

nated by *verbal* overshadowing, a prevalence of language in the process of evaluation' that 'interferes with the processes of visual and bodily evaluation and recognition'; it is also prospective in the sense that the physical presence of a specific object is yet to be experienced, and the 'capacity to idealize is diminished' due to an abundance of information (Illouz 2012: 229–232; our emphasis).

Therefore, most importantly the 'therapeutic culture' of emotional capitalism depends primarily on an ethos of verbal communication, both in the workplace and in intimate relations. Further facilitated by the explosive expansion of virtual spaces of interaction, this has led to the rationalisation of emotions and the loss of a sense of irrational mystery that arises from traditional, deeply bodily matrices of contact. We argue that the cinematic equivalent to these processes can be found in the way that mainstream commercial filmmaking has become increasingly dependent on a certain representational system – one that has been thoroughly rationalised and cleansed of potentially confusing ambiguities<sup>3</sup> in the name of earning maximum profits. The definite point of departure for all films is the screenplay – a *verbal* blueprint for 'a story told with pictures' (Field [1979] 2005: 20).

## REJECTION OF THE VERBAL

Since *Empty* took Estonian audiences by surprise in 2006, Õunpuu has never ceased to express his utter dissatisfaction with the usual toolkit of commercially-driven, mainstream narrative cinema that serves the 'quick-profit-oriented mentality' of the entertainment industry (Tuumalu 2009). In a speech he wrote<sup>4</sup> on the occasion of receiving the annual award from the Estonian

3 Incidentally, Illouz contends that '[a]mbiguity is pleasurable and consists of mixing two repertoires of known meanings ... Ambiguity is a property of erotic play because its intent is to say without saying or to say several things at once, based on shared and implicit meanings. Ambiguity is playful and pleasurable because it is a virtuous way to play with social rules' (Illouz 2012: 193).

4 Delivered by Rain Tolk, one of the recurring stars in Õunpuu's films.



Society of Film Critics for *Autumn Ball* in 2008, Õunpuu stated,

The good people of the Estonian Film Foundation should forget about the screenplays analysed to death by brainy experts, the meticulous storyboards and the call for dull dramatic structures – this kind of risk management is nothing but repressive. We need more playfulness and ecstasy; we need creativity, freedom and the courage to risk. Give the cameras to madmen and cut them loose on the streets – the sober and the reliable have not justified themselves. (Õunpuu 2008: 127)

While Estonian film industry is heavily subsidised by public funding that is distributed by the aforementioned state-established non-profit institution (since 2013 called the Estonian Film Institute), it is still dominated by the logic of neoliberal capitalism. The policy documents of both the Ministry of Culture and the Estonian Film Institute envision, in language imbued with mercantile jargon, a local commercially driven cinematic ecology that will need less rather than more state support in the future (see, e.g. Estonian Ministry of Culture 2012). Understandably, any allocation of public funds needs to be based on transparent criteria, and script evaluation is certainly one. Yet this leaves little room for unconventional working methods, such as those increasingly practiced by Õunpuu. His films have become more and more ‘unscripted’. Starting with two adaptations (*Empty* and *Autumn Ball* both [loosely] based on Mati Unt’s works), Õunpuu has moved further away from the constraints of a pre-conceived script with each successive film (although, admittedly, never discarding the script completely). The most radical in this respect is his latest film, *Roukli*, shot over a period of a few weeks at Õunpuu’s country house on the island of Saaremaa with a group of actors who were, notably, also co-producers of the film. Significantly, the

production was to a great extent financed by a crowdfunding campaign through Hooandja, an Estonian equivalent of Kickstarter and only received some state support for distribution. According to Õunpuu, while not completely unscripted, he approached the shooting period ‘not as a process of the visual codification of the script, but as a creative test tube for mixing the impulses of talented actresses/actors, divine accidents and an unrelenting desire to speak about only what’s on our minds at the moment’ (Delfi 2014). Among other things, this blurring of borders between the roles (of director/screenwriter/actor) reveals his (and his collaborators’) desire to eschew the chains of capitalist professionalism – a manifestation of alienated work as defined by Marx (1988: 74, 128–134; Marx 1844). Not respecting the conventional division of labour is also a boldly ‘amateurish’ move, and as such, indicates a desire to return to a non-specialised and hence non-alienated form of work<sup>5</sup>.

Some have interpreted this act of diminishing the importance of the script as a testimony of Õunpuu’s inability to produce a ‘proper’ screenplay. What is meant by ‘proper’ becomes evident in Andres Laasik’s review of *Temptations of St Tony*. In Laasik’s opinion, the script of *St Tony* is unfit for filming as it rejects classical narrative formulas (e.g. unity of action, dramatic conflict, development of characters; Laasik 2009). Yet Õunpuu’s deep-seated distrust of those formulas – basically ‘latter-day schematizations of Aristotle’s account of tragedy’ (Stam et al. 2015: 226) – and his repudiation of the conventions of Hollywood-esque psychological realism (see, e.g., Teder 2009) can be seen as a counter-hegemonic move against capitalism and its ‘therapeutic

5 As Marx famously put it: ‘In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can be accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic’ (Marx, Engels 1947: 22).



culture' as defined by Illouz. In Õunpuu's own words,

Indeed, I don't particularly like the [conventional] narrative structure, which seems to be the sole domain of the Ego. The psychologism stemming from the pathetic story of a human being is small and trivial. Not insignificant! I'm not a psychopath. Film simply offers room for so much more than this. Losing oneself is much more pleasant than constantly constructing oneself. I'm not really that interested in stories. I don't know why. I watch films that tell stories when I need a dose of escapism, and I need to escape when I feel bad. I feel bad, in turn, when I do things I don't want to do. When I'm put under pressure and need to find a way out. This is the function of this kind of films. I'd like to delve deeper, to return to the initial cause and to do something about it, not just to let some protagonist to make an escapist fuss with a story. There's something tragically infantile about that. (Varts 2015)

Instead of 'escapist' stories shaped by neo-Aristotelian (see, e.g., Stam et al. 2015: 226ff) formulas, which he finds belittle 'the spectator and her/his intelligence and ability to understand the world and reflect on it, apprehend it' (Teder 2009), Õunpuu prefers to present situations (see Stam et al. 2015: 233<sup>6</sup>), calling for cinema that functions as a 'mystery in itself ... that opens doors rather than closes them' and that invites spectators into a filmic space the meaning of which remains elusive (Teder 2009). Indeed,

6 Jacques Rancière, arguing against Aristotle, writes that '[l]ife is not about stories, about actions oriented toward an end, but about situations open in every direction. Life has nothing to do with dramatic progression, but is instead a long and continuous movement made up of an infinity of micro-movements' (Rancière 2006: 2).

the notion of space appears to be highly important for Õunpuu:

Cinema is, after all, a visual medium and images can say a lot. The way characters are composed in the filmic space, how they relate to their surroundings – all of this is information and these arrangements can tell a story. I feel much more at liberty in pictorial language than in the world of a narrative, text-based story. (Teder 2009)

Õunpuu's inclination to the visual, his interest in world building and a certain mode of 'spatial expression', is perhaps related to his background as a student of painting at the Estonian Academy of Arts, which forms part of his variegated educational path. However, all in all, it fits well with his subversive frame of mind and his resistance to the currents of the heavily verbalised 'therapeutic culture'.

Õunpuu is mainly drawn to spatial peripheries – islands (*Empty, Roukli*), suburbs of various kinds (*Autumn Ball, Temptations of St Tony*), urban and industrial wastelands (*Autumn Ball, Temptations of St Tony, Free Range*), semi-abandoned rural settings (*Empty, Temptations of St Tony, Roukli*). This predilection for the marginal can – and should – be interpreted as a critical comment on the consequences of rampant neoliberalism; a comment that has global relevance, but works especially well in the Estonian context. After all, the extent to which the Estonian political discourse has internalised and normalised the tenets of neoliberalism is rather astonishing (see, e.g., Annist 2009; Åslund 2007: 306; Bohle, Greskovits 2007; Leif et al. 2008; Juuse, Kattel 2014). Õunpuu's cinescapes have deservedly caught the attention of many Estonian film critics and scholars. Most significantly, an imposing number of studies have been devoted to *Autumn Ball*, his feature debut (e.g. Sarapik, Viires 2010; Laaniste, Torim 2010; Lige 2010/2011; Närpea 2015). Filmed in Lasnamägi, the

largest residential area in Estonia built during the Soviet era, *Autumn Ball* presents a striking spatial representation of the post-Soviet neoliberal condition and is certainly one of the most vivid examples of Estonian 'cine-architecture' of all times (along with Peeter Urbla's *I'm Not a Tourist, I Live Here* [*Ma pole turist, ma elan siin*, Estonia, 1988]; see, e.g., Närepea 2003, 2010). Due to the great relevance of spatial categories in Õunpoo's works, the following discussion on interpersonal relationships – especially those of an intimate nature – portrayed in his films is closely linked to the analysis of the environments that the characters inhabit. In other words, there seems to be a connection between how the characters feel and the kind of spatial environment they inhabit.

Before embarking on an analysis of intimate relationships in Õunpoo's oeuvre in the light of Illouz's understanding of 'cold intimacies', it is worth emphasising that Illouz's study of 'the condition of love' is derived 'from the standpoint of women ... who opt largely for marriage, reproduction, and middle-class lifestyles' (Illouz 2012: 10). That is, she posits the nuclear family as the 'norm'. Marx and Engels famously denounced the 'the smug, evangelical mid-Victorian family' (Hunt 2010), i.e. the bourgeois marriage, as 'a system of wives in common' and called for the abolition of this community 'of prostitution both public and private' (Marx, Engels 1988: 228). They also called for the abolition of 'the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife' (Engels [1884] 2010: chap. II.4), but by no means did they deny the human need for emotional and physical intimacy (ibid.: 101–102; also Marx, Engels 1988: 211–212). In fact, it appears that they quite sincerely mourned the loss of sentimentality in bourgeois familial relations (Marx, Engels 1988: 212), yearned for 'the chivalrous love of the middle ages', and highly valued the 'firmest loyalty' of both – and equal – partners in exclusive committed heterosexual relationships (see Engels [1884] 2010: chap. II.4; in contrast, they argued that, in bourgeois marriage, a polygamy of sorts had been

reserved as a privilege of men, and women were little more than objectified 'instruments of production'). True, Engels was also of the opinion that '[t]he intense emotion of individual sex love varies very much in duration from one individual to another, especially among men [*sic!*], and if affection definitely comes to an end or is supplanted by a new passionate love, separation is a benefit for both partners as well as for society' (Engels [1884] 2010: chap. II.4).

Õunpoo, however, appears to have some severe doubts about the nuclear family, as well as about the ethics of its representations in mainstream cinema:

[Let's take the common assumption] that family is the pinnacle or apogee of human aspirations and accomplishments. This is an infantile dream; an idea of a return to one's childhood, except that one's role in it has changed. I have watched a whole lot of Hollywood films that revolve solely around this goal. When one is to observe this purposeful reinforcement [of a common 'truth'] for a little while, it starts to appear ethically unacceptable and even repulsive. (Varts 2015)

Õunpoo's words suggest that watching a simplified and goal-driven version of intimate contact between a man and a woman (which leads to marriage), as offered up by Hollywood cinema, made him suspicious or even hostile not only towards this cinema, but also to the institutions it promotes, such as nuclear family and marriage, and perhaps even intimacy itself. It is worth mentioning that learning about the ways and reasons that harmony and happiness has been sought in Western workplaces by applying the techniques of Mayo and his followers might have a similar effect – distrust and even hostility towards such techniques that reduce the most intimate and individual emotions and behaviours to means of increasing capitalist profit. However, the question arises of whether Õunpoo

in his films merely offers a critique of ‘Hollywood sentimentality’ and the mobilisation of intimate life to fulfil capitalist goals or whether he also proposes a positive alternative for emotions, as a means of achieving individual self-fulfilment and creating a better, i.e. socialist society, or is suggesting that an emotion-free life can be fulfilling.

In this respect, our first observation is that the lack of intimacy is not represented as positive in his films. Secondly, in this quote he speaks from a position of ‘power’, since he is a man and thus in a better situation than women in the regime of ‘emotional capitalism’, especially those women seeking – due to either ‘inherent’ biological drive or social pressure – long-term commitment. Ultimately, it is not particularly productive to look for definitive alternatives to or escape routes from this regime. Rather, the characters of Õunpuu’s works, as well as their relationships, only offer subjective, although by no means ideologically neutral, reflections on the situation of men and women in the age of neoliberal capitalism, here and now. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, they also appear to be, both individually and collectively, embodiments or expressions of certain (open-ended) threads of thought and not representations of actual, or imagined, men and women, thereby encouraging the spectators to contemplate and apply their own frames of reference for further reflection.

### **A MATTER OF CHOICE: EMPTY AND AUTUMN BALL**

*Empty*, a screen version of Mati Unt’s short story of the same title (1971), revolves around entangled axes of desire and heart-ache, break-ups and reunions. Mati, an ‘intellectual’<sup>7</sup>, his wife Helina, and the violinist Eduard, her new eye-candy (and possibly Mati’s friend), end up in Eduard’s seaside summer cottage for a weekend, after Mati has maneuvered himself out of his teaching obligations in order to join Helina’s esca-

pade. Mati’s feelings for Helina have cooled, only to be reignited, even if somewhat reluctantly and disdainfully, by Eduard’s amorous advances towards her. To make his unfaithful wife jealous, Mati has started an affair with Marina, one of his painting students. After sleeping with Marina in a hay barn seemingly somewhere near Eduard’s cottage, Mati asks Helina for a divorce, announcing, clearly half-heartedly, that he is now in love with Marina. This prompts Helina to reconsider her already planned future with Eduard. Disappointed by this turn of events, Eduard drops Mati and Helina at a small airport where, in yet another twist, Mati escapes through a bathroom window.

At several points in the film, the men repeat that it is up to Helina to choose between them, but she is apparently struggling to make up her mind. At the same time, Helina’s hesitation and inability to decide between the two men reflects Illouz’s above-cited idea that the modern intimate order of emotional capitalism has turned relationships ‘into cognitive objects that can be compared with each other and are susceptible to cost–benefit analysis’ (Illouz 2007: 36). On the other hand, Illouz proposes that this kind of indecision is a consequence of modern sexual freedom, unconstrained by ‘the shackles of moral regulation’ (Illouz 2012: 60). She also suggests that ‘sexual freedom is similar to economic freedom in that it implicitly organizes and even legitimizes inequalities’ (ibid.: 61), emphasising, importantly, that ‘commitment phobia ... appears to be ... a male prerogative’ (ibid.: 68). This asymmetry, observes Illouz, typically causes more misery to women (who are under the pressure of their ‘fertility window’) than to men (who are far less affected by this and are generally more reluctant to settle down), and consequently cements male domination over women. In *Empty*, however, both men, but especially Eduard, seem to have few if any commitment issues – Mati is already married to Helina and Eduard is clearly devastated by not having the future he had arranged (so much so that towards the end of the film he gloomily states, ‘This is the

7 He could be a writer, as in Unt’s (autobiographical) text, or an artist, as suggested by his teaching job with painting students, as well as by one of the commentators of the film (Höbemägi 2006).

end'). Marina also appears to be quite nonchalant about the outcome of her affair with Mati. Yet Mati's escape at the end of the film suggests that, ultimately, Helina is not in control of the situation. And perhaps, the sole purpose of Mati's actions throughout the film has been revenge for her unfaithfulness. Still, the bottom line is that all characters end up alone – and miserable, one might add.

On one hand, the particular situation in which these characters find themselves reflects Õunpuu's rejection of the Hollywood scenario in which the character ultimately completes the 'Oedipal trajectory', by finding a new love at the end of the story, after suffering romantic disappointment at the beginning due to betrayal or the death of a loved one. At the same time, the film's conclusion points to the director's struggle to provide a viable alternative – viable in a sense of being satisfactory for his characters and also for the viewers, especially for those used to mainstream Hollywood cinema.

On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, their sense of isolation has a social dimension, one that pertains not only to the particular characters inhabiting the filmic space, but to a more general human condition. As Donald Tomberg has aptly summarised,

They are in a situation where everyone is alone, yet where being alone is impossible. The relationships ... do not move in 'straight lines' in relation to each other; rather, the field lines are constantly shifting and thus the relationships change within a single network. In this case, love cannot be separated from asserting oneself. (Tomberg 2006: 96)

The fundamental sense of isolation – as well as the impossibility of severing all ties with the (social) webs that surround them – becomes particularly clear in a scene, or more precisely, a single shot toward the end of the film. On the way to the airport,

Eduard's car breaks down on an isolated road surrounded by wild hayfields. Dispirited by yet another setback, Eduard takes his violin and a bottle of wine from the boot of his car, hands the bottle and a corkscrew to Mati, walks away from the couple, and starts playing a melancholy tune on his violin, while Mati and Helina share the wine. The next shot shows Mati standing with the bottle in the foreground, while Helina is hunkering down next to the broken car, and Eduard is playing the violin a little further down the road. **(Figure 1)** The static shot lingers, creating time for the audience to take in the distance between the characters. The depth of the image and the expanse of space separating the characters are enhanced by the use of a wide-angle lens. At the same time, the frame ties the trio together, emphasising the impossibility of escaping this uncomfortable situation. In fact, a sense of discomfort permeates the entire filmscape – the spaciousness and emptiness of the seaside comes across as agoraphobic, especially if one is to take into account Mati Unt's statement that he finds summer as a season 'objectionable, even repulsive' (Kaus 2006). A sense of anxiety is further evoked by the frequently overcast sky that blocks the optimistic undertones so often accompanying the summery settings in Estonian cinema.

In our opinion, the film can be read not only as a comment on romantic isolation but also as an illustration of the contemporary human condition – of the effects of the regime of extreme, yet illusionary, individualism, which atomises the society and increases suffering, individually and collectively. While Mati Unt's *Empty* was written under decisively different socio-political conditions, and Õunpuu does a brilliant job in evoking the atmosphere of the early 1970s (Eduard's Soviet-made car, the costumes and hairstyles of the characters, and especially the unmistakably epochal moustaches), the film is manifestly contemporary in its broader connotations.

*Autumn Ball* offers an entire gallery of lonely characters, irrespective of their relationship status. Opting for a multi-



FIGURE 1. Mati (Rain Tolk), Helina (Maarja Jakobson) and Eduard (Taavi Eelmaa) in *Empty*.



protagonist structure in his debut feature could be seen as yet another of Õunpuu's strategies to rebel against the dominant rules of screenwriting, as perpetuated in popular handbooks on the topic, for example by Syd Field ([1979] 2005). While this is certainly true, it is also important to keep in mind that multi-protagonist narratives have always existed in cinema and, over the past 25 years, they have become increasingly popular (although not dominant) even in mainstream cinema (see, e.g., Bordwell 2008: 191; del Mar Azcona 2010). Interestingly, Mariá del Mar Azcona suggests that this increased fascination with multi-protagonist narratives can be seen as an articulation of 'some of the dimensions of contemporary desire', an echo of the modern romantic regime characterised by 'crises of the institution of marriage', the 'deterioration of such concepts as monogamy and sexual exclusivity', the 'proliferation of sexual options' and 'such new cultural notions as sexual liberation, serial monogamy, confluent love' (del Mar Azcona 2010: 6–7).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in *Autumn Ball* one can observe a wide range of amorous encounters, including glimpses of the delightfully tender moments of a newborn affair (between Mati and Jaana), the contemptuous tedium of a stale cohabitation (Maurer and his wife), and outright sexual perversion (Kaski's paedophilia). However, on the whole the film, while peppered with small alleviating doses of comedy, conveys sombre notes of social desolation and the lack of true intimacy that is only redeemed to a modest extent in the (open) ending when Jaana returns to Mati.

Here we will concentrate on a triangle of characters and their relationships – Maurer, his wife, and Theo. The woman is

defined through her partner/husband – we never learn her name or, for that matter, her occupation. Mrs Maurer's husband is an architect, apparently in his thirties (just like his wife), who has rather unconventionally, considering his social standing, chosen to live in a generally disreputable part of the city<sup>9</sup>. This is an act of 'practicing humility', he explains to the amusement of his 'friends', a group of young and trendy architects and designers. Mrs Maurer is obviously less than happy about her husband's choice, sobbing at one point that the people in the neighbourhood intimidate her. Specifically, she had seen a man with a rotting hand, 'drinking cologne and smelling of piss' and she feared she might catch 'some horrible disease from them'. Significantly, the Maurers live in a sophisticated, sparsely furnished apartment that is located in a new building, with windows that reveal the reality of the slowly dilapidating Soviet 'blocks', which seem like a distant vista that is reduced to a decorative picture of the 'post-communist condition'. It provides an ornamental backdrop for Maurer's cynicism towards 'bourgeois cosiness and warmth', as well as towards his colleagues, the agents of a commodified 'creative industry'. **(Figure 2)** Yet Maurer himself is part of this same system, professionally and socially, reaping the benefits of the newly established neoliberal regime that include a high income and considerable social prestige. Moreover, his relationship with his environment is extremely insincere – he is only an observer, not an active participant. Indeed, Maurer comes across as an unsympathetic character – just as his critical assessments of the neoliberal 'culture industry' as well as its agents and values sound like empty mannerisms, he also fails to be sincere, vulnerable and emotional in his intimate life. His wife observes quite accurately that he is 'like some Bergman character, not even human anymore', a 'tiny little man suffering

8 This pertains especially to the post-communist period in the former Eastern Bloc, as the sexual liberation experienced in the West in the 1960s did not occur to the same degree in socialist countries until the political upheavals of the late 1980s and early 1990s. For example, Estonian statistics show that the number of marriages is in deep decline compared to the Soviet period. In 2015, there were 30% fewer marriages than in 1991 (<https://statistikaamet.wordpress.com/2016/08/19/uks-statistiline-paev-1991-ja-2015-aastal/>).

9 For the local audiences, it is clearly recognisable as Lasnamägi, the last and, some might add, most unattractive, Soviet housing estate (see for more detail Laaniste, Torim 2010); for the international spectators, it functions as a signifier of a generic 'post-communist Eastern Europe'.



**FIGURE 2. Maurer (Juhan Ulfsak) and his wife (Tiina Tauraitė) in *Autumn Ball*.**

**FIGURE 3. Maurer's wife and Theo (Taavi Eelmaa).**



because of your God's silence, squirming within his personal black and white world'.

Meanwhile, Theo is in many respects the complete opposite of Maurer. He works as a doorman<sup>10</sup> at a somewhat shabby establishment called *Mirage* (sic!), which serves as a conference venue during the day and a restaurant-nightclub at night. He lives in a dingy one-room flat in a block of Soviet high-rises. At work he has to put up with drunken customers and his cocky young manager who suggests that, in addition to looking after the cloakroom, he should also take up janitorial duties – a proposal that Theo finds very much humiliating. On the bright(er) side, *Mirage* is the perfect place for Theo to pursue his 'hobby' – picking up women for one-night stands. He even has a little black notebook for keeping track of his erotic conquests, with over 200 entries and counting, complete with the zodiac signs of his lovers. Theo's behaviour complies with Illouz's analysis of serial sexuality. Citing Francis Fukuyama, Illouz considers serial sexuality/polygamy as a dominant feature of modern 'sexual fields'. Serial polygamy that used to be reserved for a small group of the most powerful men became accessible to 'many rather ordinary men' after the 1950s (Fukuyama 2000 in Illouz 2012: 72).

The shift occurred due to the 'autonomization of the sexual sphere from moral regulation and from formal class endogamy' that gave men, independent of their socio-economic status, the opportunity to have commitment-free and unpaid sex with multiple women. Yet, sex retained its connotative links to power, which is why serial sexuality has become a symbol of status for men – a 'victory over other men' – as well as an expression of 'their authority and their autonomy'. This autonomy and control requires emotional detachment – a 'metaphor for masculine autonomy' (Illouz

2012: 72–73). Hence, while Theo is unable to get the upper hand in his professional life, his sexual seriality provides a way for him to boost his ego and find validation in his intimate life. Notably, Theo's encounter with Mrs Maurer starts off as dozens of his earlier liaisons – he picks her up after she has had a serious quarrel with Maurer at the *Mirage*. But in the morning, things are different for Theo; he does his best to tidy up his place, serves her fried eggs for breakfast, makes awkward jokes and seems to have forgotten all about his sex journal. In stark contrast to his earlier post-coital behaviour, which is characterised by detachment or fake intellectualism, he now dares to cautiously reveal himself. Yet later when Theo and Mrs Maurer are eating at a nearby burger joint, the insurmountable social, economic and cultural gap between them becomes obvious. **(Figure 3)** As Theo enthusiastically explains his aspirations for starting his own business, namely the rental of ship containers for construction waste and garbage ('Think about how much construction takes place in this town. Think about how much construction waste it leaves. I'm not going to be a doorman all my life!'), Mrs Maurer loses her appetite, pardons herself swiftly and leaves, refusing to give Theo her phone number. At this point, the extent to which emotions have become subject to a consumerist and 'hyperrational' cost-benefit analysis, 'rational deliberation and the desire to maximize utilities and well-being' (Illouz 2012: 91) is very clear. Although Theo might be able to fulfil Mrs Maurer's emotional and sexual needs, and in the longer run, even provide her with all the material comforts, he will never rise to a social and cultural position that is comparable to the one her husband enjoys. And so Mrs Maurer returns home to her partner bored with her 'dry skin and cold eyes'. In the end, the film's sympathies decidedly lie with the Theos of this world, which is perhaps particularly evident in a later scene where Theo beats up a 'great actor and director' who is wreaking drunken havoc at the *Mirage*, and doing so with increasing contempt after learning that the director

10 An important aspect for understanding his condition is the fact that doormen (or porters) used to belong to the privileged service sector during the Soviet period, together with shop-assistants and bartenders, who were well-paid, well-connected and generally of relatively high social standing. Their importance and prestige declined rapidly after the collapse of the Soviet system and the onslaught of capitalism.

specialises in relationship comedies. Theo's act of pure, passionate, primitive rage is miles away from Maurer's sophisticated, but impotent cynicism, and leaves little doubt about where the film's (ideological) affinities and antipathies lie – with the dispossessed and genuine passion in all walks of life; and not with conformism, sterile intellectualism or neoliberal collaborators. Notably, Illouz deems the cooling of passion and emotional intensity to be 'an important cultural loss' (Illouz 2012: 245).

### **IN SEARCH OF A NEW PATH: TEMPTATIONS OF ST TONY**

Both *Empty* and *Autumn Ball* had been loose adaptations of Mati Unt's literary works.

In contrast, *Temptations of St Tony* was conceived by Õunpuu himself. Maybe this is why this film best reflects his views on the world in which he lives<sup>11</sup> and the role cinema should play in it. At the same time, it reveals that rejecting 'therapeutic capitalism' does not necessarily mean embracing socialist values or creating a better world. It could just lead to confusion. Ironically, this point is made at the beginning of the film, which opens with a passage from Dante: 'Midway upon the journey of our life I found myself within a forest dark, for the straightway pathway had been lost.' These words ostensibly refer to the position of Tony, the film's protagonist, but can also be regarded as referring to the filmmaker who, in this film, takes another step away from mainstream cinema into unknown territory. Making sense of this film is difficult and this may be because it is comprised of situations, and does not have a coherent story with a sense of progression. The connection between the episodes is often tenuous, and we are thrown into one situation without the previous one being concluded. Moreover, some of the episodes belong in the realm of

dream, rather than in material reality, while others are liminal. The inclusion of these unrealistic inserts might signify the importance the director attaches to non-verbal communication, to *sensing* rather than *understanding*. However, despite his intentions, we might try to explain the film, placing greater importance on the parts taking place in the material world rather than in a dream.

*Temptations of St Tony* can be described as a travel film if not as a road movie. First, these travels are literal as Tony travels by car and later by foot through Estonia. They are also metaphorical, as he encounters different cultures, in different periods of Estonian history, as well as looks into its future. The 'story' begins when the protagonist, the manager of a factory (until it is closed down) attends his father's funeral somewhere in the countryside. Tony leads the funeral procession, carrying a cross and participates in a meal attended by his deceased father's friends, but stays silent, which signifies his distance from the culture to which his father (and possibly mother) belonged. We can presume that this culture was based on tradition, a close family and neighbourly ties, as well as relative isolation from the metropolitan centre. It managed to withstand state socialism and is holding out against the pressures of neoliberalism, but its power is diminished, given that the funeral procession is small and the people following the coffin are all old.

With his flashy, western car and wearing a white coat against the dark clothes of the other funeral guests, Tony is an outsider in this society and he leaves as soon as the funeral is over. The visual and aural style suggests that the director is also an outsider to this culture. The first shot shows us a hole in a wall, through which we observe the procession. Moreover, we get only fragments of the dialogue rather than any coherent talk. Some time later Tony and his wife are attending a performance of *Uncle Vanya* (*Дядя Ваня*, 1897) by Anton Chekhov, where one of the actors, who is also Tony's acquaintance, says that 'the peasants are

11 In fact, the film could be interpreted as a series of eloquent 'audiovisual adaptations' of Marx's ideas, such as the inherent cannibalism of capitalism (see, Marx [1887] 1976: 484–485; Harvey 2003: 148), which finds several vivid parallels in the film, e.g. Tony gobbling up pieces of Nadezhda's lifeless body, or 'the meat factory' specialised in dismembering people.

all alike; they are stupid and live in dirt'. It is difficult not to also attribute this opinion to Tony, although Õunpuu's protagonist is beyond verbalising such an opinion.

From the funeral Tony heads home, but on his way, he kills a dog and drags the dead animal into the wood where he finds hands that have been cut off. He reports this to the local police who, instead of having him take them to what looks like a crime scene, treat him like a criminal, locking him up and threatening him with torture. This attitude harks back to the Soviet era, when the authorities routinely did not differentiate between the victims, witnesses and criminals, everybody was treated with suspicion, and was even born guilty. Luckily Tony is spared his punishment because the inspector learns that a woman the police have been looking for has been found, only to escape again. Later we learn that the woman, Nadezhda, works as a sex slave in a brothel. It seems that police are colluding with her masters and captors in their search for her. This suggests that the post-communist apparatus of power shares the worst characteristics of the old regime: protecting crooks and punishing victims. Tony, however, helps the young woman to escape.

Back home, Tony attends a party, which indicates that a different culture from the one into which Tony was born is flourishing in Estonia – one of neoliberalism and 'emotional capitalism', as defined by Illouz. All the partygoers represent Estonia's affluent middle class, as is suggested by the villa where the party takes place, the clothes worn by the guests, especially the women, and the fact that they all arrive in cars. The relationship between the guests is blatantly patriarchal, with the wives looking after their husbands who are drinking too much. Moreover, at some point, one guest mentions the practice of wife-swapping as a means of improving the quality of marital life, illustrating his 'analysis' with statistics in order to demonstrate how the lives of different categories of couples improve thanks to practicing this form of adultery. This brings to mind Illouz's claim regarding the rationalisation of erotic life under

'emotional capitalism', as conveyed in her aforementioned observation that 'relationships have been transformed into cognitive objects that can be compared with each other and are susceptible to cost-benefit analysis', into 'objects that can be traded and exchanged' (Illouz 2007: 36).

It is the men who initiate and regulate the 'wife-swapping', while the women are the passive recipients. This is reflected in the discomfort on the faces of the women at the party. Unlike the other men, Tony shows no enthusiasm for this sort of sexual entertainment. However, he does not engage in a discussion about this practice, but remains taciturn. His silence, as well as his mechanical, zombie-like dancing, contrasted with the grotesquely expressive dancing of the other men, betrays his distaste for the ideas expressed by the other guests and their behaviour. Again, a scene from *Uncle Vanya* provides a key to Tony's behaviour, as the character in the play expresses his dislike of the educated folk who are obsessed with self-analysis and try to label and measure everything they experience. However, by staying silent Tony deprives himself of any agency and tacitly condones the proposed wife-swapping.

When Tony is eventually alone with his wife, she has a nightmare, followed by an attack of hysteria. Tony suggests that she see a therapist, to which she responds with a sneer, accusing him of wasting the best years of her life. It is not difficult to guess that she is suffering since Tony does not love or care for her. She would like her husband, rather than a specialist, to deal with her unhappiness. Hence, while it appears that Tony is contemptuous of the 'therapeutic culture', flourishing among the Estonian middle class, in his marital life he is unable to offer an alternative. The remaining scenes with Tony and his wife show that their marriage is in crisis, with husband and wife accusing each other of neglecting their house and their child. **(Figure 4)** As we witness Tony's estrangement from his wife, we also observe his growing interest in Nadezhda. **(Figure 5)** He keeps meeting the Russian girl throughout the film, including



**FIGURE 4.** Tony (Taavi Eelmaa), his wife (Tiina Tauraitė) and their daughter (Liis Lepik) in *Temptations of St Tony*.

**FIGURE 5.** Tony and Nadezhda (Ravshana Kurkova).

**FIGURE 6.** Tony burying the dog.

at the gates of the factory where her father works and which Tony is forced to shut down, due its being unprofitable. The brutality of this act, practically unimaginable during the times of state socialism, shows that neoliberalism, while claiming that it cares about workers' emotions, is in fact concerned about them only when it boosts productivity. And it discards their emotions, when the workers are unable to produce enough profit. The 'factory gate' episode is a reference to the time when state socialism and Fordism ruled in Estonia. As with the rural life, this culture did not disappear entirely but is at mercy of the forces of neoliberalism.

If *Temptations of St Tony* was a mainstream film, we would expect Tony to 'save' Nadezhda and complete his 'Oedipal trajectory' by marrying her. Such an outcome would also justify the title of the film. However, in *Temptations of St Tony* this does not happen; Nadezhda and Tony always part, despite his reciprocated erotic interest in her and his willingness to help her. Their final encounter is at *Das Goldene Zeitalter* (The Golden Times), a kinky nightclub-cum-brothel, where women are offered to men at auction – a more radical practice than wife-swapping and a step closer to total patriarchal rule. Tony tries to escape with Nadezhda, but he is put in a cage, and has to see how his beloved is abused by her captors and eventually commits suicide by smashing her head with a brick.

As we have suggested, the film is peppered with criticism of contemporary sexual and other behaviour, and marked by rationalisation and self-analysis. Ironically, Õunpuu demonstrates that such behaviour conceals the utter abuse and exploitation of the weak by the strong, even reducing the weak to an animal-like existence, to living like bodies without souls. The apex of this attitude is the practice of sawing (living) people into parts, perhaps to have their organs sold – a not so veiled reference to the fact that people in the poorest Eastern European countries, such as Romania or Moldova, actually sell their organs out of sheer poverty. Tony himself is meant to be

reduced to a bunch of organs, but he manages to escape from the 'hospital' where it happens.

Õunpuu also takes issue with the relationship between animals and humans and with human beastliness by including a motif of a black dog that reappears in the narrative and Tony's life almost as frequently as Nadezhda. First, Tony kills a dog in his car and carries him (or her) to the woods to be buried. Later he encounters another (live) dog resembling the one he killed, and takes him home. Tony is very attached to this animal (as he will later become attached to Nadezhda). His wife objects, perhaps in this way conveying her jealousy of Tony directing his affection away from her. At the end of the film, the dog is killed, perhaps by Tony's wife, and the protagonist again carries the dog to the wilderness to bury him. However, this time Tony comes across as an animal mourning the death of his companion. He talks to the dog, but we do not hear his words, which might suggest that they are uttered in a language inaccessible to humans. Tony also produces a trail of saliva when carrying the dog and lying next to him. Although the excessive salivating might be caused by his crying, it resembles the behaviour of a dog. Paradoxically, when mourning the death of the dog, the previously impassive Tony is at his most expressive and human – maybe because on this occasion he is showing his emotions without expecting to be rewarded for it. This episode is particularly touching as it takes place in winter, which renders Tony's actions almost heroic. **(Figure 6)**

### **CHOOSING LIFE: FREE RANGE AND ROUKLI**

Echoing the patterns of the seasonal cycle, the hedonistic summer of *Empty*, the melancholy autumn of *Autumn Ball* and the despondent winter of *Temptations of St Tony* were followed by the hopeful spring of *Free Range*. While poking some serious tongue-in-cheek fun at the stereotypical representations of youth as 'the spring of life', *Free Range* appears to communicate a rather sincerely optimistic take on the



prospect of coming to terms with the world, especially in comparison with the previous *Temptations of St Tony*.

In contrast to *Empty* and *Autumn Ball*, and similarly to *Temptations of St Tony*, *Free Range* focuses on a single protagonist – only this time the focus shifts from the middle-class, middle-aged, mid-level manager Tony to young Fred, an aspiring writer who is struggling with the idea of ‘settling (down)’, both in economic and intimate sense. The film opens with a scene in the editorial office of a newspaper, with the editor-in-chief raging over Fred’s latest piece – notably a review of Terence Malick’s *Tree of Life*. The editor quotes Fred’s article: ‘Faggoty, faggoty, faggoty garden, faggoty mother in the faggoty light. Faggoty American family drama. Faggoty God, why did you take my kid away?’ and proceeds to fire him on the spot. Apart from an apparent reference to Öunpuu’s own assessment of Hollywood cinema<sup>12</sup> (even in the case of such a critically acclaimed manifestation), the sequence frames Fred as a young rebel, in tune with the long-established cinematic tradition of non-conformist male adolescents refusing to comply with the social conventions, rules and limits.

Arriving home, Fred’s girlfriend Susanna (and the only offspring of Fred’s former boss, the editor-in-chief) surprises him with the news that she is pregnant and intends to keep the child. The rest of the film observes Fred’s attempts at adapting to his new situation and ends with his ‘approval of the world’, i.e. with him taking responsibility for the life of his unborn child. His journey towards this decision includes repeated episodes of self-destructive partying, with Fred and his friends consuming large quantities of alcohol, dancing and throwing up in derelict surroundings, listening to 70s’ hippie rock and behaving in an utterly anti-intellectual manner. In addition, Fred makes somewhat half-hearted

efforts to find a more ‘reasonable’ source of income (as opposed to being an aspiring writer without any social benefits). Having been laid off from the newspaper, he tries his hand as a warehouse worker, perhaps ‘practicing humility’ in his own way, or searching for a job that would entail as little contact as possible with the conformist bourgeoisie.<sup>13</sup> He also has a fling with his ex-girlfriend, who dumped Fred for a German guy (‘Baron von Hardon’ in Fred’s sarcastic words) but has now returned home. While the girl seems to be enthusiastic about taking up where they left off, Fred’s initial fascination quickly cools and he goes back to Susanna.

In the light of Illouz’s study, Fred’s initial behaviour can be diagnosed as a case of ‘commitment phobia’. According to Illouz, commitment phobia is one of the main features of emotional capitalism and its ‘emotional organization’ is directly related to ‘the social conditions and the cognitive modes through which people make choices and bind themselves to others’ (Illouz 2012: 71). Illouz argues that men in this modern day and age are able to rely on only themselves to make a comfortable living (in comparison to the Victorian era when a dowry could play an important part in achieving this state), and that, especially since the 1970s, they have been able to choose their mates from a considerably larger pool, in comparison with women who are confined by their fertile age (assuming that having children is a priority for these women). This creates an unequal situation where men can afford to postpone commitment, and instead practice emotionally detached serial sexuality, and in turn, ‘control the terms in the sexual bargain’ (Illouz 2012: 77–78). Thus, considering the fact that ‘cool individuality’ is one of the dominant features of the experience of love in neoliberal capitalism, Fred’s choice to overcome his commitment phobia and settle down with Susanna can, paradoxically, be seen not as

12 Öunpuu’s choice to use 16mm film stock, which has been traditionally reserved for non-theatrical, low-budget and amateur filmmaking, is also important in this respect, betraying a desire to distance his work from the mainstream.

13 At this point, it is also important to keep in mind the Soviet tradition of dissident intellectuals forced to menial positions such as stokers or night-time custodians at lower-level institutions.

an act of bourgeois conformism but rather as a sign of resistance to a certain facet of the capitalist ecology, although the film does not make it entirely clear whether Fred was motivated by instrumental aspects (Susanna's affluent family has connections that could help him pursue his career as a writer) or affective factors (his feelings for Susanna). It is equally possible that Fred's decision was stimulated by youthful idealism. Perhaps having witnessed the sheer misery of Susanna's parents (especially her mother who consumes excessive amounts of wine and even attempts to take her own life because of her husband's infidelity and utter cynicism), Fred is trying to save Susanna from having to bring up their child in this toxic environment. This reading is further encouraged by the images of a white horse against blue sky in the final shot of the film. Accompanied by Neil Diamond's 'Glory Road', these images seem to suggest that Fred can be compared to a heroic Prince Charming, coming to the rescue of his beautiful bride and exchanging the excitements of the 'glory road' for the tranquillity of domesticity. Although certainly stereotypical in its devices and perhaps even saccharine in tone, this finale comes across as refreshing in its sense of sincere, although open-ended, hopefulness.

Notably, towards the end of the film Fred picks up a denim jacket that someone has left near the garbage bins outside his house. This is a reference to an earlier scene in the film where Fred's father explains how he cleaned up his act before Fred was born:

Your mom was still pregnant with you. I was on my way home, from drinking, probably. What else. I crossed the street and suddenly saw this sports jacket. Just a regular jacket, you know? I didn't think anything of it. Not my style at all. But I stopped. I don't know why. I thought, here I am now, me and this jacket. And I knew it was a sign. I put it on. I went home wearing it. Then I completed my

studies at university and got a job. For four years I was a family man. I did it. I paid my debt to society.

Hence the film escapes the musty trap of Hollywood-style never-ending marital bliss suggesting that Fred's sense of familial responsibility might not be everlasting, if he is anything like his father (and he clearly is, or at least was).

At the same time, the last scene of *Free Range* leads to believe that Fred might not follow in his father's footsteps. The scene is set in the ruins of a house at the seashore, a roofless skeleton with plaster crumbling from its windowless walls and grass growing where floors once existed. Apart from demonstrating the intentional rejection of yet another clichéd trope of mainstream romantic cinema – a house with a 'white picket fence' as a symbol of the trivial 'happily ever after' – this choice of setting suggests the possibility of building a different future on the ruins of the past. **(Figure 7)** In general, the youngsters in the film tend to inhabit spaces relatively untouched by the capitalist economy – deserted industrial wastelands and buildings, neglected beaches, unkempt studios, outmoded bars – reflecting the social situation and mindset of the adolescents who are unwilling to join the capitalist roller-coaster, even in its 'intellectual' manifestations. Indeed, *Free Range* appears to strike the same chords as *Autumn Ball* in its stark contrast between the conformist and bohemian intellectual class. The former is represented by Susanna's father, the editor-in-chief, who lives in a suburban villa, filled with antique furniture, sophisticated pieces of art and crystal tableware **(Figure 8)**; the books in his office are neatly arranged on shelves, with an almost military sense of orderliness. This stands in complete contrast to Fred's father's environs – a tiny apartment in a shabby wooden house, crammed with chaotic piles of books. **(Figure 9)** In fact, the second part of the film's title, *Ballad on Approving of the World*, is borrowed from Bertolt Brecht's poem of the same title. Brecht's poem is about





FIGURE 7. Fred (Lauri Lagle) and Susanna (Jaanika Arum) in *Free Range*.

FIGURE 8. Fred and Susanna at a dinner party at Susanna's parents' (Roman Baskin and Rita Raave) villa.

FIGURE 9. Fred's father's (Peeter Volkonski) place.



**FIGURE 10.** Jan (Juhan Ulfask) in *Roukli*. Publicity still.  
**FIGURE 11.** Marina (Mirtel Pohla) in *Roukli*. Publicity still.





**FIGURE 12.** Eeva (Eva Klemets) in *Roukli*. Publicity still.  
**FIGURE 13.** Villu (Peeter Raudsepp) in *Roukli*. Publicity still.

people who collaborated with the fascist regime and the title is meant to be ironical. In an interview, Õunpuu draws a parallel between fascism and today's global market economy, which with its drive to universality and extensiveness resembles a younger brother of fascism to him (Toomela 2013). The sympathies of *Free Range*, just as in *Autumn Ball*, clearly lie with non-conformist intellectuals, such as Fred's father, who are in both films aligned with the blue-collar working class, suggesting that they share a situation of dispossession under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism. Although Fred's own character was sharply renounced<sup>14</sup> by a number of Estonian critics for his erratic behaviour, his 'unpleasant', 'infantile' character (e.g. Laasik 2013, Adorf 2013, Luks 2013) and his abominable treatment of Susanna (e.g. Tomberg 2013), we agree with Õunpuu's assessment that even though Fred is 'self-centred, confident of his ingenuity' and somewhat puerile in his belief of romantic freedom, he is also ultimately a positive character 'in his concern for not only himself but also the world at large, dedicated to such values as freedom, honesty, solidarity, equality and eventually even responsibility' (Laaniste 2013). Not insignificantly, the union of Fred and Susanna, coming from the opposite 'shores' of the intellectual divide, signals that it might be possible for the young Freds of this world to come to terms with the limits posed by socioeconomic realities without completely abandoning their ideals, or being forced into literal or metaphorical solitude.

Of all films Õunpuu has completed so far, *Roukli* attracted the least sympathetic reviews, with some critics accusing the director of creating an unintentional parody of a Scandinavian arthouse film in the vein of Ingmar Bergman and Lars von Trier (Dalton 2015). Given that, as we have already indicated, Bergman is mentioned

in the dialogue of one of Õunpuu's earlier films, the director himself might actually agree with such an assessment. Indeed, there is much that connects *Roukli* with the work of these better-known auteurs, such as a location in an austere northern landscape during a (short) summer, as well as a motif of an approaching apocalypse and its effect on artists and intellectuals. On this occasion the apocalypse takes a form of an unspecified war, which is raging in Europe in near future. A group of young artists, comprised of two couples, Jan and his ex-wife or ex-girlfriend Marina, and Villu and Eeva, who is Jan's sister, are hiding on a farm near a desolate stretch of coastline. (**Figure 10–13**) Staying together allows them to discuss the old subject of the meaning of life. Each of the four people seems to have a different stance on this issue. Jan, who is cast as the main character, adopts a nihilistic posture. When Marina suggests to him that he should occupy himself with writing, he replies that the only thing he can write is his own obituary. Later he also says that his goal is 'to desire nothing else than to desire nothing'. Not only does he prefer nothingness over 'something-ness', he also mocks Marina when she unpacks her paints and brushes, with the intention of resuming her work and proclaims that art should be an expression of one's 'soul'. Jan's nihilism and cynicism might be a result of his expectation that the end of the humanity is approaching, as signalled by the noise of low-flying military planes. It could also be caused by his internal, personal crisis. While being contemptuous about his own life, he is also critical of others, accusing his sister and her husband of staying together for pragmatic reasons, rather than for love.

While Jan chooses not to choose, his sister Eeva reacts to the war by focusing on ordinary tasks. She is the most active of the four characters, always doing something around the house, such as getting firewood to make a fire, carrying water or tending the wounds of their unexpected visitors. Moreover, in contrast to the other characters, who are interested in esoteric issues, Eeva refuses to discuss them, perhaps knowing

14 It is important to again keep in mind that the protagonist as the 'main object of audience identification' (Bordwell 1985: 157) is one of the pillars of the Hollywood narrative system, which Õunpuu decisively rejects.

that engaging in psychology or philosophy will not solve any problems, and only cause people more misery. In a telling episode, when Marina asks her if she is happy, Eeva replies that she learnt not to ask such questions and that she needs to fetch some water. Of all characters depicted by Õunpuu, Eeva most emphatically rejects the 'therapeutic culture', yet she does so, not by adopting cynicism, but through activism. In this way she harks back to earlier, pre-modern times when people lacked discursive tools to analyse their emotions, and relics of which can be perhaps found in the rural communities among 'simple', uneducated people, whom the director presented in his earlier film. However, Eeva chooses not to analyse her emotions not due to a lack of sophistication, but most likely because she is aware that therapy never ends and ultimately does not help the sufferers.

Eeva's husband Villu also comes across as more active than Jan, as he busies himself cutting wood and exercising his athletic body. He is also the only person in the group who shows any interest in religion, reading the Bible and quoting from it. However, this does not bring him any moral enlightenment as he is unable to make sense of the Bible stories. Villu's study of the Bible could be regarded also as a pragmatic move, given that he later admits that musicians in Estonia only make money by writing sacral music. Moreover, when two refugees are discovered in their house, he is the only one who chooses not to help them, preferring to regard the wounds and deprivation they have suffered as being the result of squabbling between people with whom artists have nothing in common. Subsequently Jan also reveals his lack of faith in religion, yet in his case this is coupled with a desire to live according to Christian values. Ultimately, the film reveals a scepticism towards Christianity or any other form of religion as a means of redemption or finding the meaning of life (not surprising, given that Estonia is regarded as one of the most secular countries in the world), while also admitting that the lack of religious faith leads to an inner void. Towards the end

of the film, Jan becomes a kind of 'secular Christian martyr' when he volunteers to be taken to Peedu, a mysterious 'warlord', and risks being tortured or killed by him. This act could be regarded as a consequence of Jan's disrespect for human life. However, in our view it reflects on his willingness to save the lives of the others by sacrificing his own.

The war and the discovery of wounded men on the property where the four characters live can be read as a metaphor or metonymy of the 'war on terror' and the subsequent refugee crisis, which befell Europe around the time that the film was made. The influx of refugees divided Europe, with liberals and leftists being identified with a pro-refugee stance, while hostility to refugees was seen as the position of the right-wing parties and uneducated masses although in reality the situation is more complex. Õunpuu seems to broadly support this stand by showing that the group allows the refugees to stay and tends their wounds. Their arrival is even welcomed by Jan who on this occasion regains some of his energy. As previously mentioned, Villu is the only person who is openly hostile to refugees.

In line with the reading of war by authors such as Paul Virilio (Virilio 1989; Virilio, Lotringer 1983), *Roukli* proposes that every war is ultimately a global war; it is impossible for anybody to shy away from its consequences. This is demonstrated first by Jan and Marina being threatened by an emissary of Peedu, a local warlord, or maybe a simple crook, responsible for wounding the two refugees and eventually capturing Jan. Hence, while suggesting that the victims of wars should be helped, it also points out that such help can result in a serious risk of retaliation.

The society presented in *Roukli* is less divided by the gender lines than Õunpuu's earlier films. However, Marina, with her admission that she joined her ex-boyfriend Jan because she had 'nowhere to go', brings to mind women from Õunpuu's earlier films, such as Tony's wife, who also had nowhere to go, at least not without risking social and

economical setbacks. Also, as in *Temptations of St Tony*, the landscape is both seductive and menacing. It is a place where one can escape the war (it is admittedly safer than the city, which is captured in the course of the narrative), but it can also be frightening and one risks punishment at the hands of contemporary ‘partisans’, or crooks taking advantage of the chaos caused by war. As in *Temptations of St Tony*, we also see a dog to which the protagonist is attached. However, Jan is simply fond of his dog, and does not try to communicate with him on a deeper level or seeking redemption through becoming (like) an animal. That said, nature is still a source of hope in the film, as shown in the episode with a candlelit night party, where small birds are stroked by the humans and then fly away; or the walk in a forest, where the camera follows a slithering snake for a considerable time. Such episodes underscore the fact that by engaging in war people risk not only their own lives, but also those of their animal ‘brothers and sisters’.

## CONCLUSION

The writings of Eva Illouz suggest that the workings of ‘emotional capitalism’ have often made people (women more than men) miserable in love due to the complex interplay of various modern/capitalist institutions, discourses and practices, even if some of those institutions, discourses and practices are themselves progressive in a certain sense. However, Illouz does not propose that emotionally satisfactory intimacy has been completely lost, or that it is impossible to achieve it. But she also does not say *how* to be(come) happy in love. Quite the contrary, in the epilogue to *Why Love Hurts*, Illouz clearly states that she intentionally abstains from giving any instructions, which would only add to the burden of the tyranny of the ‘therapeutic culture’ (Illouz 2012: 238). Similarly, Õunpuu does not reject love or intimacy – or, for that matter, the human need for it – in his films; in our opinion, his films actually betray his romantic nature. At the same time, his films are not ‘about’ love; they are, if anything,

about the human condition under the neoliberal regime (of emotional capitalism). And just like Illouz, Õunpuu does not set out to explicitly say what has to be done differently, or, to put it differently – how to save the world. In fact, in an interview recorded with him for the documentary *Film of 60 Seconds of Solitude in Year Zero* (2011, Estonia, directed by Mark Raidpere), he decisively abstains from such an ambition. Furthermore, human relationships, including, and perhaps especially, those of an intimate nature in Õunpuu’s films are representations/embodiments of economic/social relationships of which he is openly critical. It appears that what he wants to say is that changing these relationships is difficult – if not impossible – for individuals since the broader socioeconomic ecosystem keeps overriding their efforts. And even if the only apparent, or easiest, way out is to escape, the question arises – where to? Õunpuu does not answer this question, but shows us characters trying to do so by becoming isolated and self-contained, seeking intimacy with another person, accepting (even if grudgingly or after some deliberation) commitments towards close ones, martyrdom and communing with nature. Although none of these means comes across as completely original, all together point to a remarkable effort to escape from the clutches of neoliberalism.



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