

# Remembering the Soviet Past in Estonia. The Case of the Nostalgic Comedy “The Light Blue Wagon”.

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*There is a difference between nostalgia and nostalgia. It is quite horrid when the former nomenclature or collective farmers yearn for the Soviet time. But the nostalgia of “The Light Blue Wagon” is in fact childhood nostalgia.*  
(Kivirähk 2003a)

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In the processes of reconstruction and rewriting of history that accompanied and followed the collapse of the Iron Curtain some two decades ago, Estonia like other post-socialist societies began to reconsider its experience of a totalitarian system; however, in doing that, new boundaries between remembrance and forgetting were drawn. When the occupying regime was publicly declared criminal and culturally, mentally, and ideologically unacceptable, the question of the legitimacy of positive memories and nostalgic feelings connected with that period also arose.<sup>2</sup>

In Estonia, a country that has gone through the post-communist transition and has become a member of the European Union and NATO (2004), people still have to ask themselves what kind of a stand they should take regarding the Soviet past and its legacy. Was it a period of occupation with its repressions, ideological pressure, threat to culture and language, and economical degeneration, or at the same time also a bizarre “old Soviet time” (“nõukaaeg”) that inspires only smirks and smiles? The roots of this problem lie in the period of “mature socialism”, namely the 1960–1980s; its public meaning is still open for discussion.

The aim of the current article is to look into one of the attempts to shift the border between remembrance and forgetting as well as to give the Soviet past (back) its “voice”. I will analyse “the right” to feel nostalgia in the Estonian post-Soviet culture of remembrance through media texts published in connection with one of the first Estonian plays concerned with renegotiating relations with the era of mature socialism – “Helesinine vagun” (The Light Blue Wagon) published in 2002 by Andrus Kivirähk, a popular Estonian writer. Produced by Taago Tubin, the comedy premiered at the Viljandi Theatre “Ugala” in 2003. “The Light Blue Wagon” deals with the Soviet time and its legacy through the childhood memories of people who were at the very beginning of the 21st century in their thirties, depicting them as the last generation to remember the Soviet period.

## From the Soviet occupation to “the old Soviet times”

The ethnologist Ene Kõresaar (2005), having examined the dynamics of social remembrance of Estonians, uses the metaphor of “prolonged rupture” to characterize the national discourse typical of the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. In the processes of restoring, reconstructing and nationalizing history, which accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union, Stalin’s era was interpreted as a “national rupture” (repressions, ideological pressure, persecution, nationalization, collectivization etc) (*ibid*, 112), giving an idealistic, romantic and nostalgic evalua-

tion to the Republic of Estonia prior to World War II, which became a role model in the political sense (*ibid*, 65). Expanding the notion of rupture to the entire Soviet period, however, turns it into a kind of “interim” time separating the periods of independence (*ibid*, 201). According to the early post-socialist ideology, aiming to get rid of everything that reminded of the Soviet rule, the entire period of Soviet annexation meant living in a state of abnormal condition. As Kõresaar’s hypothesis goes, the discourse of “the new beginning of Estonia” at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s declared the Soviet work experience and mentality futile in the face of the new society and market economy: the Soviet-era identity was sensed as something that one should be ashamed of (*ibid*) while integrating into the West. Suddenly there was no legitimate way to remember the past, to share one’s experiences publicly – “the right” to personal happiness – even while living in a totalitarian society (Jõesalu 2005).

In the 1990s, turbulent social and economical changes increased social inequality in the Estonian society. The discourse of “rebuilding the nation”, however, dealt with the growth of inequality, the split of the society into “winners” and “losers”, the increase of regional differences, the loss of illusions, the triumph of individualism etc (Lauristin&Vihalemm 1997, 82–83) as the price of freedom that needed to be paid collectively (Kõresaar 2005, 66). More and more, one began to ask, “Is this the kind of Estonia we longed for?” and public attention turned away from past traumatic experiences to the conflicts in the present (Kõresaar 2003a, 163). One started to question the boundaries between remembrance and forgetting drawn during the fall of the Soviet Union: one’s private experience (the nostalgia of solidarity and security connected with daily-life during mature socialism) and the public discourse’s negative evaluation of the entire Soviet era opposed each other (Kõresaar 2005, 195). The late Soviet time was seen as a time of stability, security and social equality, while the present was sensed as the opposite (*ibid*).

At the beginning of the 21st century in Estonia, both the transformed approach towards the Soviet past (Anepaio 2003) as well as altered views of the West (Keller&Vihalemm 2003; Runnel 2003) could be detected. History lost its relevance in public space by the second half of the 1990s (Kõresaar 2005, 199): it was concluded that national history should only be employed in pragmatically reasonable quantities (Anepaio 2003, 217). What is more, the harmonic vision of the Republic of Estonia prior to World War II was reevaluated (Kõresaar 2005, 199). The new, future-oriented image created by the young political and economic elite no longer saw Estonians as suffering and helpless, but as a nation capable of successfully integrating into the West (Lauristin&Vihalemm 1997, 106). At the same time, the Estonians’ attitudes towards the West have become more critical: simple black-and-white schemas and “pure” feelings (admiration, desire etc) have been replaced with a more ambivalent approach, among other things criticizing overconsumption, materialism, the onrush of Western mass-culture. The worshipping of the West as a whole, based on the Soviet experience – the need for Estonia to distance itself from the East – has become more rationalized. (Keller&Vihalemm 2003).

Although the dominant discourse of rupture that prevailed in Estonian society up until the end of 1990s has been changed and everyday life under socialism has by now become a part of public discourse, the problem – how to interpret the Soviet-era experience – remains unsolved (Kõresaar 2005, 196). This period in history, in Pierre Nora’s idea a “site of memory” (*lieu de mémoire*), creates specific emotions and semantic associations to different generations. The Soviet occupation and World War II effected major changes for the entire generation of people born in the 1920s and grown up in the Estonian Republic. As their former lifeworld and value system collapsed, they had to acquire new practices and strategies needed in order to adjust themselves to the society (Kõresaar 2005). “For people who were born and raised in the Soviet period, everyday life in Soviet Estonia represented normality. (...) for them, in turn, the radical change occurred with independence.” (Jõesalu 2005, 92)

In addition to intergenerational differences there are also variations within the private and

public space. In the public sphere, where the rhetoric of rupture prevails, mature Soviet era has not yet been declared “normal”; the public has started to pay attention to the everyday life of this period relatively recently (Kõresaar 2005, 195) – when popular culture and entertainment have gradually lead to the recognition of the life experience at the time (Kõresaar 2003a, 162). The presidential elections held in 2001 and won by the former top communist Arnold Rüütel have been considered as the marker for the legitimising of the Soviet era and “the flourishing of Estonian SSR mentality” (Kaju 2006). However, a heated debate broke out about “the legitimising” of the Soviet regime and “the danger” of it: the memories of the former nomenclature were seen as a dangerous yearning for the past, an inability to let go of the Soviet past as well as of the structures and ideas typical of the society at the time. Whereas the so-called curiosities of everyday life during the late Soviet era, the strategies and practices that now, in the context of the information and consumption society, seem bizarre and make people smirk (see for example Tammer 2004) were considered to be a “safe” topic: “for example, how to fix your curls without hairspray, or what to use to colour pantyhose?” (Tammer 2004, 6). The distinction from the ideologies that circulated in the public space during the 1990s is manifested in the most direct way in the notion “the old Soviet times” (“nõukaaeg”). This concept has a very wide usage – in addition to everyday communication it is also used for example in the news programmes in public broadcasting. The emergence of the discourse of “the old Soviet times” is another way to comprehend the era of mature socialism, indicating the diversification of the images of history, the depolitization of memory. At the same time, talks about the riskiness of the Soviet nostalgia have not faded either.

## Theoretical framework

“The Light Blue Wagon” as a play and staging might be viewed as a cultural product created on the basis of communicative memory, e.g. on what the public in the given moment considers topical. This gives reason to speak of the dynamics of nostalgic remembrance into cultural memory (Assmann 1988). The generational memory, until this day belonging to the field of communicative memory associated with everyday communication, as well as the childhood and adolescence memories of Kivirähk and his contemporaries have become, in connection with the writing and staging of “The Light Blue Wagon”, e.g. its materializing, a part of cultural memory fulfilling collectives’ identity needs. However, the staging is not merely a fact of cultural memory – generational and individual memories in turn start to function within it and at its reception: for the viewers both what they consider important within intergenerational narrative as well as what they value from the aspect of, for example, nationality become actualized in it. For example, the commentaries and standpoints of the theatre critics who have reviewed the production are also an indication of the fact that the production itself has become a part of communicative memory (see Kõresaar 2003, 13–14). Thus, “The Light Blue Wagon” is an act of cultural memory, which in the process of remembrance is on the one hand a fixer of communicative memory, and on the other hand – while the process continues – a groundwork influencing communicative memory (compare with Assmann 1988).

### *“The Light Blue Wagon” as a medium of memories*

I have approached the topic of post-Soviet remembrance culture by concentrating on theatre as the medium of memories.<sup>3</sup> It is proposed that one has at hand only those kinds of memories, or to be more exact, one can only recall those kinds of “pasts” for which the society provides adequate external support in the form of memory mediums (Neumann 2004, 201). As an ideo-

logical institution theatre has always influenced the way past is being remembered. By participating in the representation of the past and in the discussions held over them, by “reanimating” the past here and now on stage, the theatre sometimes contrasts with the prevailing historical views and at other times strengthens them. By creating and shaping social memory theatre as a collective art models both collective and individual identities. As a mirror and/or crooked mirror of an era, theatre exists only in the present, in a dialogue with the audience: the semantic field of the production evolves through an immediate communication with the viewers and is thus changeable in time (Epner 1992, 84).

The Estonian theatre at the end of the 1980s featured several stagings which by reviving the past were driven by the wish to give the Estonians back the (life) history taken from them by the Soviet occupation authorities. The relatively one-dimensional national pathos of this kind gave way to a more complex (self-ironic, tragicomic, retrospective, dreamlike etc) standpoint in the 1990s (Kruuspere 2002, 278). But it can be argued that the depoliticised (late) Soviet time, Soviet time as a subject, was absent in Estonian theatre before the “The Light Blue Wagon”.

Within the reception of “The Light Blue Wagon”, there have been doubts about the timelessness of the text and emphasis on namely its contemporariness of time and space. This has also been expressed by the author of the play, Andrus Kivirähk (Sild 2003), known for his pertinent humour, sense of irony and absurd. Being one of the most enthralling writers of the Estonian younger generation, Kivirähk (born in 1970) is considered to have captured the essence of “being an Estonian” the best, it is often said about his characters that they are somehow “true to life”.<sup>4</sup> Why does the author of the play view this piece as being topical? What does it say about the society and its remembrance culture at the beginning of the 21st century in Estonia? Have these memories been, so to say, in the air for too long? Does the answer lie in the social commission of the issue – the Soviet era and the Soviet nostalgia? Is it about crafting coherent subjectivities?

Published in 2002 (Kivirähk 2002), the play was staged by Taago Tubin (born in 1971) at the Ugala Theatre in the following year. The title is borrowed from the cartoon “Old Lady Shapoklyak”, produced by the studio “Sojuzmultfilm” in 1974 (director Roman Kachanov, art director Leonid Shvartsman). “The Light Blue Wagon” – “Goluboi Vagon” – is the name of a popular song performed by Crocodile Gena, a character created by the Russian writer Eduard Uspensky. “Ugala” Theatre advertises the still-running play as

*“an insight into the nostalgia for the Soviet period in the souls of today’s thirty-somethings, the so-called Russian<sup>5</sup> cartoons generation. It is a story about the people who are tormented by the transformation of common ideals and dreams with the change of social order. A story about remembering and forgetting. (...) A play for people who long for a different world...”*

(Helesinine vagun 2003).

The concept of “the Russian cartoons generation” entered public discourse via the play itself: relying on the introduction provided by the theatre, it was used by a journalist interviewing the director Taago Tubin (Tubin 2003). Later the notion came up in several cultural and social commentaries (Louhimies 2004; Rooste 2004; Robert 2004; Kuusk 2004; Kiiler 2004; Viira 2004). The critics have also called this generation “the generation of the 80s” (Saarepuu 2003) and “the last Soviet generation” (Kivirähk&Tubin 2003). How does this “generation” look back at its childhood and adolescence?

“The Light Blue Wagon” compares the Soviet time and how it is being remembered from the point of view of different generations (Epner 2007; Grünberg 2008). There are three characters representing the Russian cartoons generation: Indrek (Aarne Soro) who is having a birthday-party on the 1st of May, and his classmates Märt (Gert Raudsep), owner of a tourism farm, and a litera-

ture teacher, Tõnu (Meelis Rämmeld). The scene is set in Indrek's modern bachelor's apartment which reflects his financial success in life (although it is never really mentioned what he does for living). The neighbour of the birthday-boy, Anton (Arvo Raimo) represents the older generation. As a child he was deported to Siberia and is now afraid of the recurrence of Soviet occupation. Indrek's girlfriend Sirts (Kata-Riina Luide) stands for the younger generation. She is a 23-year-old cosmopolite who does not share the values and memories of her boyfriend's memory community (Burke 2003 [1989]).

The protagonists of the "Light Blue Wagon" open themselves in their stories about the past. They remember their childhood in Soviet Estonia as it is recalled in everyday communication. One could say that the amount of vodka they consume makes them even more talkative and explains their exuberant behaviour. They bring back the May and October parades, details about Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev's (1906-1982) funeral, the wishes and idolized items from the past – like bananas and Walt Disney's cartoons. The past is brought back not only by memories. Play-inside-the-play technique helps to illustrate the Soviet time by reenacting the parades and Brezhnev's funeral in a fun-making and irreverent way. As the game moves on, the classmates dress in Soviet-time clothes. One of them – Märt – puts on a militia-uniform that belonged to Indrek's brother. The neighbour of the birthday-boy who comes over to complain about the noise is pulled into the game, that awakens his childhood-horror of the deportation by constituting the revival of the Stalinist era. Märt in the militiaman's role appears too real to Anton for him to doubt his words. He commences to believe that the totalitarian regime has been re-established, and starts to use the behavioral strategies needed in order to get along with the system. Here the differences between the cartoons-generation's and the previous generation's experiences with the Soviet regime become clear. The old man, born in 1940, does not take liberty for granted. But it seems that the young men do not understand his fear. The fact that the thirty-year-olds of "The Light Blue Wagon" turn the deportations into a farce, suggest the possibility that in the beginning of the 21st century, (at least) some memory communities have distanced themselves mentally from the repressions of the 1940's. The writer has used here the play-within-the-play technique, as if so rubbing less salt into the wounds of "the collective subconsciousness" of Estonians. However, the audience laughs about the role-play about the deportation. The genre born in the remembrance process also points to changes in the discourse (from Soviet occupation into "the old Soviet times").

Resting on the experiences of childhood and adolescence the Russian cartoons generation contrasts itself with people from the West as well as with the younger generation who possess different memories, values and lifestyle. The Soviet experience makes them in a way older and more experienced than their contemporaries in the West:

*What do they know!? Think about us – we have been little Octobrists, Pioneers, Communist Youth, we were born in Brezhnev's time and we have lived under both socialism and capitalism while they have always led their lives in the same easy careless way and the biggest thing that has happened in their life is the break-up of a band or the victory or defeat of their favourite football team. And that's all.*

(Kivirähk 2002, 220).

The attitude is the same towards the younger generation who in the play is represented by Sirts. Although she is born in the end of 70's, in the "Light Blue Wagon" she is portrayed as a member of a generation that does not "remember" the Soviet time. Tõnu and Märt are testing her, asking for example about books they read in childhood. Sirts doesn't know anything about them, she is not even interested in reading. The classmates sense that they are living in different worlds – everything that was unusual and beyond reach during their childhood, is common for

Sirts as a so called typical representative of modern youth. This convinces them even more that they are the last ones to remember. Leopold (Tanel Ingi), who is of the same age as his classmates, gives a metaphor for the last Soviet generation in his end monologue by announcing that he is in fact an alien. This could be considered the model which draws out the differences between the world of today and yesterday in black and white: for the younger generation as well as for "the people from the West", the childhood land of the Russian cartoons generation and its language is as mysterious as the alien's recollections of life on another planet. In fact, Leopold's narrative could be viewed as a metaphor for a childhood spent under the Soviet rule, as his home planet was destroyed in a great explosion (post-Soviet rupture (Kõresaar 2005) and the collapse of the USSR as a cultural trauma (Aarelaid-Tart 2006)).

## The question of nostalgia

As an evaluating concept with a strong emotional charge, "nostalgia" signifies the pain of yearning, a longing to return home, the desire for a beautiful (idealized) past (Vääri et al. 2006, 727). As a longing for a "home" that no longer exists or has never existed, nostalgia makes people aware of the irreversibility of time. The "nostos" of nostalgia is in a way always utopian: it exists nowhere. Although as a longing, nostalgia is an essential part of human life, its semantic field depends on the past which is being evaluated: "'algia' – longing – is what we share, yet 'nostos' – the return home – is what divides us" (Boym 2001, xv-xvi). Svetlana Boym (2001) distinguishes between two kinds of nostalgia, both of them determined by the needs of the present. Whereas restorative nostalgia strives to reconstruct the lost home and, being at the centre of national and religious revivals, thinks of itself rather as truth and tradition, reflective nostalgia emanates from longing and loss (*ibid*, xviii). Being ironic, humorous, wistful and aware of the gap between identity and resemblance, reflective nostalgia affords a critical view of the past. "The home is in ruins or, in the contrary, has been just renovated and gentrified beyond recognition. This defamiliarization and sense of distance drives them to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between the past, present and future." (*ibid*, 49-50)

One can say that the writer Andrus Kivirähk and producer Taago Tubin are telling the story of their generation, examining their collective memory and identity by bringing their view of history on stage for public reflection. How do they look back at their experience of the Soviet period? Do they wish to return to the land of their childhood? As if fending off "accusations" of such nostalgia, the author of „The Light Blue Wagon" states with a humour characteristic of him: "it's not like anyone wants to go back there! No one would bother going to the May demonstrations, but looking back at having been there once, that's cool." (Kivirähk&Tubin 2003) Does it mean then that they possess a fond, but a little ironic attitude both towards the wishful reminiscing of the childhood and adolescent years spent in Soviet Estonia as well as towards the Soviet era as a whole?

Andrus Kivirähk (2003a) ties the concept of the "Russian cartoon generation" which emerged into the public discourse in connection with the staging of "The Light Blue Wagon", with the notion of the "winners generation", a name given by Estonian social theorists to the people who were born in 1964–1965 (Titma 2002) They are called "winners", because they were in the best stage of life during the time Estonia regained independence, and thus they were the expanders and consumers of the new opportunities created by the market economy (Titma 2002, 7). The success of this generation in the "new" society should offer a proof of them not yearning for the return of the Soviet regime. Their nostalgia is a childhood-nostalgia – it is "the childhood" that "legitimizes" Soviet nostalgia. Their nostalgia is also an innocent entertainment that becomes important in comparison with "the others". It is the experience of the Soviet time that makes

them able to differ themselves from the West as well as from the younger Estonians (Kivirähk 2003b):

*I don't feel nostalgic towards Brezhnev's era, it is rather a bright memory of my childhood that incidentally, true, coincided with Brezhnev's era. A clear distinction has to be made – the people who did very well back then but now find themselves stuck between the cogs of life, unable to adjust to the new reality, primarily feel nostalgia for Brezhnev's era. My generation, on the contrary, has managed just fine.*

(Kivirähk&Tubin 2003).

Thus, the carriers of “wrong” or “bad” nostalgia are “the former nomenclature or the collective farmers” (Kivirähk 2003a), “who did very well back then,” (Kivirähk&Tubin 2003) – to their positive feelings towards the Soviet era which started to gain public attention at the beginning of the 21st century, the writer attributes the aim of a restoration – a fantasized wish of returning there. This may indicate that for Kivirähk, nostalgia is a priori political. This is referred to by his gesture towards those who are not “allowed” to be nostalgic. His own nostalgia, e.g. the nostalgia of childhood on the other hand he considers to be apolitical.<sup>6</sup> It is in fact the practices of one's own nostalgia that people often sense as “good” (ironical, reflexive, elegiac) nostalgia. Good forms of nostalgia are interpreted as apolitical or associated with undermining, critical, progressive politics. The “bad” (restorative) nostalgia attributed to “others” is on the other hand aggressive, political and retrograde – this is viewed as an inability to let go of the past. (Nadkarni&Shevchenko 2004, 504) It seems, Kivirähk does not wish to return to his childhood land (Kivirähk & Tubin 2003), he merely “plays” with the memories from that time. The nostalgia he has is the nostalgia of “candies of the time and May festivities filled with balloons” (Kivirähk 2003b) and thus poses no “threat” to the society.

The issues raised in the commentaries of Taago Tubin often express the disappearance of ideals and dreams, human values and their carriers (Tubin 2003; Kivirähk&Tubin 2003). Generalizing, one might state that the generation concept of the director is summarized by “the transformation of collective ideals and dreams in the changing of social regimes”, expressed in the promotional text of “The Light Blue Wagon” (Helesinine vagun 2003). As childhood is a life stage predominantly very prone to nostalgia, talking about it might also be called a search for “a lost paradise” (see for example Kõresaar 2005, 37–68).

*At that time [during the 1980s] the dream that united everyone was important – the dream of freedom. Now money has become its equivalent. And thus, through the changing of social regimes, the former idealists have become cynics who cannot deal with the loss of certain important human values. For us, those values were also represented by certain works, even the very same Russian cartoons. (...) Yet the nostalgia of the generation dealt with in the play is not in its essence a longing for the Russian rule as such. Rather it is a longing for a dream gone missing.*

(Tubin 2003)

The director is longing for „longing” itself. During the “ludicrous” and “absurd” (Kivirähk&Tubin 2003) Soviet era the object of this special feeling might have been an abstract aspiration for freedom as well as for the smell of chewing gum from the West (*ibid*), which also signified a distant and unobtainable freedom. One can conclude from this that the nostalgia of “The Light Blue Wagon” might be directed towards a time with a different quality. “At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams.” (Boym 2001, xv)

## The nostalgia of “The Light Blue Wagon”: reception strategies

Although every kind of theatre is in dialogue with the time-space of its creation, it is the theatre that performs memory (and also history) which, addressing the past consciousness of its audience, particularly vividly and directly relates to the surrounding socio-cultural context. The collective identity created in these productions is further elaborated within the reception. After all, the audience cannot overlook the topic and questions raised by the play one is analysing – one has to assume a certain standpoint concerning what was experienced. In this way, the texts of those who write about theatre also mediate individual as well as collective memories, thus participating actively in social processes of evaluation. The bulk of reviews written about “The Light Blue Wagon” might, on the one hand, derive from the social communicativeness of the issues raised in the staging: the question – how to approach the Soviet past? – touches everyone alike.<sup>7</sup> The other factor is the great popularity of Andrus Kivirähk that guarantees the media’s constant attention to his works.

Psychologically, comedy is based on the feeling of superiority on the receiver’s side: that which does not correspond to the norm/ideal is symbolically “destroyed” by laughter, thus affirming the self-consciousness of those laughing as well as offering satisfaction while relieving them from tension. Indeed, the only way to laugh at something is in the presence of psychological distance. When people are unable to distance themselves from what they see or hear, they cannot sense the humour in it. (Epner 1992, 58) Thus, the reception of the comedy which is depriving the past its “power” by performing the remembrance of the Soviet era, collides with generational-specific discourses the basis of which is a different biographical and empirical background. At that, the only differentiating criterion is not age or generational belonging – within the reception of “The Light Blue Wagon”, writers can be differentiated on the basis of their attitude towards the Socialist regime, manifested in their texts: “old Soviet time”, “Soviet era” and “Soviet occupation”.

I will commence with reviews that could be characterized as examples of “the old Soviet times” discourse. These texts also deal with constructing the identity of the Russian cartoons generation. Having titled the review “Russian cartoons – A Recipe for Nostalgia” (2003), Rait Avestik (born in 1974) begins his comment (2003) with a description of his personal memory. In fact, 1/3 of the text evolves around his childhood spent in the mature Soviet era and its “exceptionality”, thus continuing the discussion about “us” and “the other” which began in the production.

*Neither the author of this text, nor Andrus Kivirähk or Taago Tubin, laments the end of the Soviet regime. On the contrary, Kivirähk’s ‘The Light Blue Wagon’ is a play about pure nostalgia, and it is a good thing that the nostalgia falls into an era which was discussed before and which fills creative people with inspiration.*

(Avestik 2003)

This is where the question arises – what does the author mean using the notion “nostalgia”? On the one hand, he seems to be distancing himself from longing after the Soviet past – deriving from “rupture” as an image of history (Kõresaar 2005), it is not “allowed” to feel sentimental towards the Soviet era. On the other hand this is exactly what he does, sliding, at that, behind the label of “pure nostalgia” and talking about a “safe” topic – children’s TV-shows. It seems, for Avestik nostalgia does not to convey political power, which is also essential for Kivirähk.

In the same manner, Jürgen Rooste (born in 1979) states that “The Light Blue Wagon” does not represent a “blind desire for the Soviet time”, but rather a memory of a time when the ambi-

tions and desires constructing identity were known. Characterising Indrek as a naturally adapting person, independent of the old as well as of the new world, Rooste finds that it is namely this character who allows to be identified with, representing Kivirähk's voice and maybe even more the target group – those who are not entangled in neither the old nor the new world and who are naturally adapting. (Rooste 2003) Without longing in the sense of restorative nostalgia for the "old" times, this group thinks it is consuming a so-called pure, "good", apolitical reflexive nostalgia (Boym 2001) and differing so from "the former nomenclature's" ideas about the past.

Veiko Märka (born in 1964), while interviewing Kivirähk and Tubin (Kivirähk&Tubin 2003) draws a direct parallel between "The Light Blue Wagon" and "the Ostalgia" phenomenon spreading in Germany.<sup>8</sup> In the text "How the Red Wagon Turned Light Blue" (2005), subtitled "On Soviet Nostalgia in Estonian Theatre, Film, Music," he explores the topic even further, concentrating on the search of Soviet nostalgia. Although Märka's text differs from the others in regard to form (not being a review) and was written later in time, I find including the analysis here justifiable, seeing as it almost sets "The Light Blue Wagon" as a standard for Soviet nostalgia. The author refers to the production as a "style pure" example of Soviet nostalgia, its long running in the repertoire a convincing proof of the topic's social commission (Märka 2005, 23–24). The critic emphasizes that the production in question "brings out at least two serious reasons why the Soviet time should be missed":

*First: people used to read more books. It was not possible to indulge in material riches – this could be replaced with intellectual self-cultivation. Second: people used to yearn. Whatever for, whether for freedom or chewing gum wrappers, but they yearned and yearning will make a person's soul more beautiful. (...) This is contrasted by a primitive and brutal present.*

(Märka 2005, 21–22)

Märka associates Soviet nostalgia primarily with V. I. Brezhnev's rule (1964–1982), calling it the "funniest" and "pithiest" era (Märka 2005, 17). Although, "there seems to be little beautiful to be remembered about the Soviet time", the period is still "more interesting" for the author than the present day (*ibid*). Thus, there is a big social commission for the "interesting", "funny" and "pithy" period in the Estonian Republic – "a linear society oriented to success" (*ibid*). In Märka's words, Soviet nostalgia should not be feared – it is merely "an interesting direction in the Estonian culture" (*ibid*, 25), nothing more – it has no power.

The author shows that several generations possess a need for the (public) acknowledgment of their Soviet experiences. Doing so, Märka makes an apt point that the generation cultivating Soviet nostalgia and talking about it is largely the generation whose childhood was spent during "Brezhnev's time" (*ibid*, 20):

*It is worth emphasizing that the generation that produces culture connected to Soviet nostalgia is almost without exception the generation whose childhood falls into Brezhnev's era (1964–1982). On the one hand, this is probably due to the sense of mission (the last generation to 'remember'), and on the other hand, the sense of one's own strength, for looking back, the absurdity of the era must create a nice dose of superiority. And one can only be creative about the issues that one is superior to. Alas, the younger ones have nothing to remember, and the older ones do not have a sense of superiority. (*ibid*)*

It is only possible to laugh at something one feels psychologically superior to and free from: those whose childhood or adolescent years were spent during the Soviet time, have the chance to at first declare the period "ridiculous" – depriving the past its power – and after that feel "superior". The older generation lacks this kind of psychological distance, it does not look at the Soviet

society only through child's eyes (see below the review written by Enn Siimer (2003)). Possibly Märka is right when he says nostalgia is a therapy (Märka 2005, 22), a chance to say goodbye to the past, laughing (*ibid*, 25).

The review of Sven Karja (2003) expresses a rather neutral, analytical approach to the Soviet time and the stage interpretation of it (the discourse of "the Soviet era"). Sven Karja (born in 1968) brings out the reasons for the evolving of the Soviet text community: "The Soviet society as an all-standardising formation guaranteed its members a conformed collective memory" (same values, opportunities, products, TV-shows). Yet the so-called new era is characterised by "a direction towards pulverising, disassociating everything." (Karja 2003) Similarly to Märka, Karja emphasizes the social commission of the subject-matter dealt with in "The Light Blue Wagon" and the need to discuss the mature Soviet era, primarily the level of everyday life. This is the reason why "The Light Blue Wagon" has such a communicative and powerful impact – the production offered a "channel", a chance to reminisce the Soviet time. Karja also asks for the reception strategies of the production. Acknowledging the "radical" variation of opinions, he brings out the following versions: laughter therapy as a chance to let go of the past; the evaluation of the Soviet time as a carefree, dear and humane era; the reminding of totalitarianism (*ibid*). Karja's review "Old Men from Atlantis" does not place the author clearly among the Russian cartoons generation. He does not immerse in constructing the generation's identity, but rather focuses on dealing with the comprehension of the Soviet time. Remaining on the analytical level, he approaches theatre as a model of communication, pondering over the dialogue of "The Light Blue Wagon" with the surrounding social context.

For Enn Siimer (born in 1946) however, "The Light Blue Wagon" seems to have functioned as an actualizer of the one-to-one negativity of the Soviet experience. The title in itself – "Cruel Games Accompanied by the Audience's Laughter" – makes him, on the background of the reviews written about the play, "the other" and refers to the cruelty of the "deportation game" which directed his reception and restored the childhood nightmare of the repressed Anton. While the majority of the younger colleagues merely mention the deportation scene, not taking up the question of its unethicalness, then for Siimer, the fact that the audience is laughing at the sufferings of the Estonian people, seems to be of key importance. While the critics who were born in the 1970s were able to find similarities with the characters of Märt, Indrek and Tõnu, then Siimer associated himself with Anton, sympathising with him. As someone belonging to the other generation, different memory community, he did not observe the performance with "arrogant banter, gallows humour" (Rooste 2003) – for him, Stalin's era was not a sort of "costume party". Anton's line that he was taken away like that once, is what creates "truthful contrast" (Siimer 2003) – bringing out the differences in attitude towards the Soviet time between generations.

While the review of Rait Avestik (2003), who places himself among the Russian cartoons generation, contains the subtitle "Of pure nostalgia", then Siimer counterparts it with:

***This is not nostalgia!** For some reason, in connection with this production, there is talk about the nostalgia of the thirty-year-olds' generation towards the Soviet time. Is it nostalgia if the characters of the play constantly recollect the era and the cartoon heroes, while drinking lots of vodka? Rather, it is the other way around: the era failed to inspire them then and fails to inspire now. It is another matter that the era united young people. Yet they are joining the audience in laughing at the era, which was actually highly cynical and degrading to people.*

(Siimer 2003)

According to the critic, he fails to understand why there is talk about the thirty-year-olds' nostalgia of the Soviet time. At the same time, even Ugala Theatre is promoting it in this manner (Helesinine vagun 2003), attaching such an interpretation to the reception. Siimer has an

altogether different view of nostalgia: nostalgia is nothing more than restorative nostalgia in the sense of longing for the past (Boym 2001). According to the ideology of "rupture", there should not be any nostalgic sentiments towards the Soviet time as an era of occupation. Aside from criticising the production, Siimer (similarly to Avestik 2003) focuses on a personal dialogue with the Soviet past. And in his interpretation, the Soviet period is an era of occupation, not fun and peculiar "old Soviet time". For this reason, the critic does not seem to regard it "possible" that the central characters of the production could feel some sort of sentimentality when recollecting, for example, cartoon characters. Siimer is rather critical of the present age as well: alienation has not disappeared, people's sense of loneliness has only grown deeper (2003). Here, one might draw a parallel to the topic of the Russian cartoons generation's "altered dreams and ideals" (Helesinine vagun 2003). At the same time, the author does not state anywhere that these used to exist in the first place: "While the past at least possessed the good quality that it united people against stupidity, then now they have all been left alone" (Siimer 2003).

## Conclusion

"The Light Blue Wagon" by Andrus Kivirähk and Taago Tubin brings on stage the memories of the generation that grew up with cartoons produced by the studio Sojuzmultfilm. By talking about „people tormented by the alteration of common ideals and dreams as the society is changing" (Helesinine vagun 2003), "The Light Blue Wagon" speaks of a generation that has started to somehow "exoticize" their childhood and youth memories of the Socialist system (Kõresaar 2003c). The so-called Russian cartoons generation is a memory community (Epner 2007; Grünberg 2008; Kõresaar 2008) with a common text-experience (the books read, the films seen), differing, because of this experience, from the younger people as well as from the people of the West. They identify themselves with such markers from their Soviet childhood as cartoons, May and October parades, bananas as the symbol of (consumer) freedom, seeing themselves as the last ones to remember the Soviet time.

The nostalgia of "*The Light Blue Wagon*" is childhood nostalgia – it is "the childhood" that "legitimizes" Soviet nostalgia. And the fact that this nostalgic generation copes in the market economy society very well, adds some more "legitimacy" to it. Thus it is a way to contrast oneself with the "former nomenclature" and its right to remember as well as share their memories (publicly with others): their nostalgia is seen to represent dangerous yearning for the past. But the ones adapted to the new society, the "successful ones" can allow themselves the little luxury of nostalgia. They do not cry for the collapsed Soviet regime, their nostalgia is "innocent": in order to constitute themselves as coherent subjects, they need to be able to remember their childhood. Their memories become important in identification processes, in comparison with "the others": it is the experience of the Soviet time that makes them able to differ themselves from "the West" as well as from the younger Estonians (Kivirähk 2003b). But by portraying that nostalgia solely through childhood experiences – via an apolitical receptional world, and leaving out the memories from the adulthood – the nostalgia shown in this play can *a priori* be seen as a political one as it is built on the denial of "bad", restorative and political nostalgia attributed to "Soviet nomenclature".

"The Light Blue Wagon" is about the production of generational identity, placing it on the stage for public reflection. The response of this collective practice of remembering has shown proof of both it being acknowledged as "familiar" as well as casted aside as unfamiliar. It contains both a (re)production of "sweet inner absurd" as well as an analytical approach to the Soviet time and the comprehension, understanding of its legacy; both cautionary approaches as well as nostalgic outbursts. What is more, the theatre critics' conceptions about nostalgia are dif-

ferent, as well as the ways to deal with the ideology of “rupture”. Thus, the production at hand actualises the questions about the role of the past’s representations in constructing identity, as well as the mediation (interaction) of individual and collective memory in the theatre. Being in a constant dialogue with the memory and memories of the audience, the theatre performing memory encourages the audience’s participation in social processes of evaluation. In the case of “The Light Blue Wagon”, both criteria establishing “memory theatre” (Malkin 1999) have been fulfilled: mediating the recollections of the Russian cartoons generation (“imitating” memories), a remembrance process is “initiated”, the components of which are both the work itself as well as its reception (including theatre criticism).

The question asked in “The Light Blue Wagon” – how to comprehend the Soviet time? – would not be as cutting and would not seem to be an attempt to legitimize the Soviet past if the voice of this period had not been “taken away” in the whirl to distance itself from the so-called Soviet stuff and Soviet mentality in the change of the 1980s and 1990s when Estonia was moving towards the re-establishment of independence. By portraying the Russian cartoons generation through shedding light on their view of history, “The Light Blue Wagon” becomes a part of a wider discussion about the “possibility of life” in the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. Still, this is done through slight irony and entertainment: the discourse of “the old Soviet times” allows one to look back at one’s everyday life during mature socialism with a warm smile and not to concentrate on the repressions of the Soviet occupational regime. By giving a voice to the Soviet past and legitimizing the (childhood) nostalgia of the Russian cartoon Generation, “The Light Blue Wagon” moved the boundaries between (public) remembrance and forgetting in Estonian post-Soviet remembrance culture. The fact that this nostalgic comedy has been in the repertory of “Ugala” Theatre for five years also indicates the audience’s need and “right” to remember and share one’s experiences. What is more, a hearty laugh can lift up moods and is good for the health.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> On the problem of the politicization of the concept of nostalgia in Estonian post-Soviet remembrance culture see Kõresaar 2008.

<sup>3</sup> On the conceptualization and representation of memory and history in the Estonian theatre see for example Epner 2007; Kruuspere 2002; 2006; 2007; Saro 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Kivirähk’s works can be characterized by the following keywords: colourful characters, lively dialogue, joy of play and freedom of imagination; his favourite methods are parody, grotesque, intertextuality.

<sup>5</sup> In the use of everyday language the Soviet period is often referred to as “the Russian time”.

<sup>6</sup> Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko (2004), having studied the attitude towards the recent past in Hungary and Russia, point to the ambivalent relationship of about thirty-year-olds – whose coming of age coincided with the political changes of the ending the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s – to their Soviet past. Confirming the difference in the forms of nostalgia between

themselves and those of the older generation, the emerging elite (compare with the “winners generation” (Titma 2002)) is able to possess “everything”: to be nostalgic and yet progressive. (Nadkarni&Shevchenko 2004, 507) By projecting their nostalgia into the childhood, this generation is able to evade accompanying political meanings: nostalgia is connected with a (life) stage, when sensing is by definition pre-political. According to Nadkarni and Shevchenko, the fact in itself that nostalgia is unleashed directly as a mere longing for a universal childhood experience, refers to the contrary: a lasting doubt that the politics behind these practices is something that needs justifying (*ibid*, 510–511). In the case of “The Light Blue Wagon” the fact that the adolescent years of the youngsters – the evolving of their awareness – fall into the Soviet time, also plays an important role. The authors of the production, however, speak about the nostalgia of childhood (Kivirähk 2003a; 2003b; Kivirähk&Tubin 2003).

<sup>7</sup> “The Light Blue Wagon” was covered in daily newspapers (Avestik 2003; Laasik 2003), cultural newspapers (Karja 2003; Rooste 2003). The local newspaper “Sakala” even published two reviews (Saarepuu 2003; Siimer 2003). It is important to note that not every production reaches such a wide coverage – there are stagings which are only reviewed in local papers. The production was also reviewed by Boris Tuch in Russian language newspapers, but the current article will not include these texts as they would bring about altogether new questions, those regarding the mentalities of Estonian and Russian-speaking communities. The analysis of these however would not fit in the confines of this article.

<sup>8</sup> As the political meanings of nostalgic practices are determined by the wider socio-historical logic of the post-socialist development of a country, such practises and even the identical intentions between these activities have different social functions according to the context in which they are manifested. As a universal phenomenon, nostalgia is unique in every cultural context. (Nadkarni&Shevchenko 2004, 518) For this reason, it is not possible to draw exact parallels between the Ostalgia-industry in Germany and the emerging manifestations of Soviet nostalgia in Estonia.

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