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Cinematic images of nation-ness: Space, time and gender in *Young Eagles* (Estonia) and *Lāčplēsis* (Latvia)

ABSTRACT

*In this article, I analyse cinematic time and space and their interaction, in which nation-ness is articulated as a unifying identity in the epic films *Lāčplēsis*/Bear-Slayer (Latvia, Aleksandrs Rusteiķis, 1930) and *Noored Kotkad*/Young Eagles (Estonia, Theodor Luts, 1927, digitally remastered in 2008). In discussing the time-space organization of nation-ness in these films, I address representations of the political 'birth of a nation' and modern national identity. I discuss the ways in which the narratives in *Young Eagles* and *Lāčplēsis* re-claim a traditional gender binary, predicated on a splitting and differentiating relationship with Otherness, embodied in the sexual threat of male enemy figures and enacted in history, politics and ethnicity.*

KEYWORDS

nation-ness
identity
narrative time
and space
gender
femininity and
masculinity
historical/combat film

CINEMA AND POSTCOLONIAL NATION-BUILDING IN ESTONIA AND LATVIA

After gaining independence in 1918, Estonia and Latvia faced the enormous task of creating the political ideologies of modern sovereign nations that would reach and trigger the non-rational core of national identity (Connor 1994). A connection between politics and emotion, between the social and the somatic, or the condition of the 'political affect' (Protevi 2009: xii) can be achieved in different ways, including the construction of functional cultural and historical narratives. Traditional cultural forms and mnemonic practices, such as theatre and literature, were involved in creating the narratives of common lineage and shared identity (e.g. A. H. Tammsaare's pentalogy *Truth and Justice* in Estonia or *Zvejnieka dēls* by Vilis Lācis and the literary work of Jānis Rainis and Anna Brigadere in Latvia). Furthermore, the developing entertainment industry and visual media, such as photography (e.g. the ethnophotography of Johannes Pääsuke in Estonia) and film, produced 'a new sensorium' (Hansen 1999: 71) of national identity.

One of the principal tasks for national cinemas in Europe after World War I was the creation of visual and narrative imagologies, integrated into the common national frames of cultural references, of their audiences' historical and local experiences. As *La Cinematographie française* argued in October 1919, film, 'should not simply be about pleasure; right now it should aid national reconstruction', The genre of the historical film, with its social and cultural function of narrating the nation's past, its myths and events, was employed to mobilize national sentiment in post-war audiences (Hayward 1993; Elsaesser 2000; Berger et al. 2008). For example, Ricci argues with regard to the Italian context:

... films elided social and cultural divisions for the diverse Italian audiences by offering them the possibility of seeing themselves as the inheritors of a supra-class, supra-regional historical unity. It is precisely in this sense that the films proposed terms for a nationalization of cultural identity. By representing a terrain in which spectators might share a common history, these films enabled that public to see themselves as simply Italians.

(Ricci 2007: 46)

In the countries that emerged or were unified after the collapse of the empires, mass marketed historical films were made not just for asserting unifying cultural competences and nationalizing cultural identities. They also negotiated visual images of historical genealogies of nation-ness, usable in the modernist narratives of postcolonial nation-building to stabilize, 'an idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress, the narcissism for self-generation, the primeval present of the *Volk*' (Bhabha 1994: 1).

The national film industries of Estonia and Latvia started to develop in the period between the two World Wars. These national cinemas did not become known to international audiences through the works of some Estonian Dreyer or Latvian D. W. Griffith; nor were they exportable, as were other emerging national cinemas on the cinematic peripheries from the North to the South of Europe. They conformed more to the definition of national cinema that proceeds 'from the basis of popular film, which has been seen by a majority audience in the country where it was made and which has been perceived

by this audience to be specifically national' (Soila et al. 1998: 3). In both Estonia and Latvia, historical and war films were particularly instrumental in constructing and valorizing a hegemonic image of ethnic nationhood, as well as reinforcing the sense of belonging to a national community and in 1924, the first feature film was produced in independent Estonia – Konstantin Märska's *Mineviku varjud/Shadows of the Past* (1924). Theodor Luts's feature-length *Noored Kotkad/Young Eagles* ([1927] 2008), based on an original screenplay by Oskar and Theodor Luts, was seen as a magnificent production, considering the time and the available resources. A Latvian historical film *Lāčplēsis/Bear-Slayer* (1931) by Aleksandrs Rusteiķis was adapted from the literary epic *Lāčplēsis/Bear-Slayer* by Andrejs Pumpurs (1888), which was central to the Latvian cultural nationalist movement of the late nineteenth century. Like Gance's *Napoleon* (1927), or Niblo's *Ben-Hur* (1925), these films attempted to manifest the moral power of the national will and the indomitable energy of national vitalism.

COMBAT FRATERNALISM AND NATIONAL SPACE IN NOORED KOTKAD/YOUNG EAGLES

The origins of Estonian cinema are sometimes traced back to 1908, when the visit of Swedish King Gustav IV to Tallinn became the subject of the first news-reel ever produced (Kärk 2010). Other sources maintain that the Estonian film history started in 1912 and is closely linked with the name of Johannes Pääsuke (1892–1918), who directed the first Estonian feature film *Karujaht Pärnumaal/Bear Hunt in Pärnumaa* (1914). This famous 'man with two cameras' is often claimed to be the father of Estonian cinema. However, in Estonian culture of the 1920s, just as in Latvia, the domestic feature-film cinema had yet to carve out a space for itself among the already established traditions of literature, theatre and music. Short film clips produced in those times featured a variety of themes, from home improvement campaigns and instructions on agricultural expertise to military parades and the Estonian participants in the Berlin Olympic Games, from crochet patterns to propaganda for the Estonian way of life.

After *Shadows of the Past* Märska's next film *Jüri Rummo* (1929) was concerned with the adventures of an archetypal Estonian folk hero struggling for equality and justice. The first sound film was a musical, *Päikeselaps/Children of the Sun* (1932), by director and cameraman Theodor Luts. He also directed *Young Eagles* released in 1927. In the nation-building context of the 1920s, the Estonian audiences perceived *Young Eagles* passionately, as an empowering patriotic film. *Young Eagles* became the first historical silent film about the Estonian War of Independence (1918–1920) and a major cornerstone of Estonian national cinema. The film's plot is based on the events of the recent past when, in 1918, thousands of volunteers were enlisted into the Estonian People's Army to resist the Red Army's advances. The film tells the story of three youngsters – a student Tammekänd (Arnold Vaino), a blacksmith Laansoo (Juhan Nõmmik) and a farmhand Lepik (as Rudolf Klein) (Ruut Tarmo) – who participated in the War of Independence. The farmhand dies as a hero, and the other two protagonists grow up as real, war-hardened men and return home to their beloved women. The final sequences of the narrative show the former student Tammekänd in the role of an affectionate husband and caring father.

In this film, the War of Independence is shown as an originary experience for achieving a normative idyll of political statehood and generating the

national sublime. The film offers positive identification with the local, idealized surroundings as 'root' spaces of nation-ness – a local village, a farmstead and the city of Tartu – to develop an all-encompassing sense of proper ethnic well-being relating to family, village, landscape, tradition and culture. The rural scenery is never merely a backdrop in Luts's film – it plays a central part in the composition of each scene, as well as in the development of the action. Rural landscapes have equal billing with the protagonists, thus, motivating their every move, as well as those of the camera, and the farmstead is represented as an iconographic site of Estonian nationhood. At the same time, the settings of the village, farmstead, fields and woods become an ideal cinematic stage and source for the metamorphosis of the film's protagonists from careless youth to mature manhood for the purpose of serving the cult of authentic Estonian masculinity.

The panoramic view of Tartu that introduces the filmic narrative refers spectators to the city's prominence in the modern narrative of Estonian nation-ness. During the second half of the nineteenth century, in the era of Romantic nationalism, Tartu was the cultural centre of Estonia. The narrative then moves from a city panorama to showing episodes from the student life of Tammekänd. The episode at his home introduces the young man in his leisure time – he imitates the smoking and reading manners of a grown-up man, and the narrative switches to jolly episodes with a student society at the University of Tartu. Tammekänd enjoys performing the rituals of manhood (smoking, drinking beer, initiating a duel) at home and in his society; yet, he looks rather comic in his mimicry of what he considers to be the rituals of mature male behaviour. The emphasis on humour in this and some other scenes of the film is actually an exercise in generating empathy as an 'emotional muscle' for the audience to perceive the protagonists as 'our boys' and to identify with their adventures and choices. The director also puts a humorous twist on the film's final episodes from Tammekänd's family life, in which he radiates a sense of utmost self-assurance and harmony with himself and with his surroundings.

To attain this sense of ideal family harmony, and to be rid of 'manhood' as the mimicry of manly gestures and rituals, Tammekänd and the other male characters must participate in war and in combat. These major masculine *rites-du-passage* launch a fraternal bonding between the three main characters who will secure the continuity between the unifying values and traditions of the pre-existing community of the past (rurality and Tartu) and modern Estonian nation-building (political border-construction and the related hegemonic gender roles/images). The film follows the tradition of the '*Bildungsroman*'/'formation novel' about the integration of an adolescent protagonist into society. Home and university are implied to be social spaces of quasi-masculine behaviour, devoid of maturity, solidity and order. Tammekänd's participation in the war together with the other two men – the blacksmith Laansoo and the farmhand Lepik – is a visual antithesis of their previous pre-war experiences. In a sequence of episodes, the three male protagonists gradually mature into guardians of the national order, which is rendered in the film narrative as a relational harmony among men of different social positions united by their experiences of war. Cross-class combat fraternalism is portrayed on-screen as a major social construct through which the gender identity and national belonging of the male characters are articulated and made to interact. Fraternalism's 'significance resides not only in the social networks it created, reinforced, or displayed, but in the meanings it articulated, the cultural context it provided for social action' (Clawson 1989: 11).

The visual image of a modern nation as a fraternal contract 'signed' on the cinematic battlefields of *Young Eagles* also prompts spectators to relate this to the notion of technology (the use of modern weapons during combat scenes) as a domain of male power (the Enlightenment paradigm of men/technology) (Kimmel and Aronson 2004: 190; Flood 2007: 304). At the same time the war, shown as an interaction between masculinity and technology, is represented as the major event in the nation's history and the boundaries of the nation's spatial order are delimited/embodyed in the fraternalizing wartime performances of the three main characters.

In their wartime camaraderie they perform and simultaneously embody the homosocial borders and boundaries of the nation-space through their conversion into a wartime brotherhood. War ultimately validates the imperative of male solidarity beyond social divisions for the sake of the nation. The cult of cross-class militant fraternalism is represented as the primary social and emancipatory route towards individual Estonian manhood and as a gender imperative for sustaining the historical maturation of Estonian nationhood despite the threat of political and ideological enemies. Women are auxiliaries in this explicitly masculine national order, either in the role of an affectionate, innocent and sometimes endangered maiden or in the performance of a caring mother.

The image of a post-war family-oriented society and couple-oriented sociability that crowns the film narrative underscores the 'childishness' in Tammeskänd's behaviour with his infant. He is happy to look after his sleeping baby, but feels at a loss as soon as real care is needed, calling his wife for help. This family utopia in a blossoming garden exemplifies a bucolic social microcosm in which the sexual and reproductive norms of the nation are sustained and protected, contrasting it with the earlier episode in which a Red Army commissar attempts a sexual assault on a young Estonian woman.

MYTH AND ITS VISUAL HAPTICS IN *LĀČPLĒSIS/BEAR-SLAYER*

Latvian film historians are not unanimous about the origins of their national cinema. These are attributed either to the first movie shown in Riga on 28 May 1896, the premiere of the first Latvian feature film *Es karā aiziedams/I Went to the War* (Segliņš 1920), or to a newsreel by the cameraman Stanke about the unveiling of the monument for Peter I (the Great) in the city centre and the visit by Russian Tsar Nikolai II to Riga in 1910. The first feature films were produced in 1913 and were mainly sentimental melodramas. After World War I, the brothers Blumbergs, Edgars and Voldermārs built a studio establishing the Latvju Filma Joint-Stock Company which produced newsreels and feature films. Photographers Jānis Sīlis, Arnolds Cālis and Eduards Kraucs started working as cameramen.

Like Finland, Lithuania and Estonia, the Latvia of the inter-war period was building a sovereign nation state, whose political principles were based on the continuity with cultural ethnic nationalism of the colonial period within the borders of the Russian Empire. The cultural discourses of the national *sensus communis*¹ were based on shared premises – folklore, nature, rurality and were reflected in films. The most popular form of film production in Latvia was the 'landscape sightseeing' film, as for example, *The Gauja River* (Linde 1935). As a stylized documentary, it told a story of raftsmen going down the Gauja River to the Baltic Sea. The first sound feature film *Tautas Dēls/The People's Son* (H. Ballašs) was released in 1934. Literary adaptations (e.g. *Zvejnieka*

1. *Sensus communis* was conceptualized by Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, as a commonality of feeling, a natural affection, a sense of community that has become self-conscious (*Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*, London, 1709).

dēls/The Fisherman's Son, Vilis Lapiņš, 1939) and historical-ethnographic films (*Latviešu kāzas Nīcā/Latvian Wedding in Nīca*, 1931; *Kāzas Alsungā/Wedding in Alsunga*, A. Rusteiķis, 1935, under its second title *Dzimtene sauc/Motherland is Calling*) were the most popular film genres of the inter-war period.

In the relative scarcity of indigenous film production, the production of *Lāčplēsis* was supported by leading political figures, such as President G. Zemgals, Chairman of the Parliament P. Kalniņš, President of Ministers H. Celmiņš and by the Cabinet of Ministers. The film claimed the literary myth *Lāčplēsis* for its visual sequelization, at the same time participating in the process of the text's cultural canonization. Although the text of the epic poem *Lāčplēsis* (Pumpurs 1888) was not a genuine folk epic, it was based on folk songs perceived as authentic accounts of past events in thirteenth-century Latvia. The epic poem's hero, the giant *Lāčplēsis* with his furry bear's ears, is part man, part bear, begot by a she-bear. In the text of Andrejs Pumpurs, the masters of the Livonian Order are servants of Satan and demons, and the traitor Kangars assists them to defeat the people's hero. At the end of the epic poem, *Lāčplēsis*, in his struggle with the Black Knight, disappears in the waves of the Daugava, to symbolize the unending battle between the powers of good and evil, justice and oppression, commitment and betrayal. As Kruks points out, the epic *Lāčplēsis* 'was a conscious attempt to create a cultural frame of reference for the emerging Latvian nation' in the late 1880s' (Kruks 2004: 1).

By the time of the film's shooting the literary epic had already been canonized as a major text-mythomoteur for the politics of cultural reinterpretations of national identity. By taking this text as a reference point for a postcolonial national imaginary, the film 'made it possible to negotiate the historical experience of displacement in a new social form' (Hansen 1994: 94). The opening episodes of the film visualize the final scenes of the literary epic. The hero *Lāčplēsis* intends to liberate the beautiful and virtuous Latvian maiden Laimdota – who is imprisoned in a castle – and faces the Black Knight in a mortal struggle. However, the expectation of the tragic end is disrupted in the next sequence of shots, revealing to the film's spectators that what they see as the final scene of *Lāčplēsis* is what the young Latvian farmhand Jānis Vanags, the major character of the unfolding filmic narrative, imagines while reading the text of *Lāčplēsis*. Together with Jānis the spectators find out that the last pages of his copy of the book are missing – the myth is thus open to interpretations different from the tragic ending of the literary epic.

The text, with its sacral cultural value, functions as an 'umbilical cord' connecting both the film's fictional hero Jānis Vanags and the film's spectators in sharing cultural knowledge about their common ancient past. Reading the text is explicitly rendered as an act of individual politics – Jānis is inspired by Pumpurs's text to enact resistance to a Russian officer coming to arrest his master. Seeing the film is similar to reading the text and is converted into a political affect due to the complex construction of the narrative space – the intra-intra-diegetic (text – *Lāčplēsis* fighting with the Black Knight), intradiegetic (Jānis reading this last scene) and extra-diegetic (spectators actually watching the text that Jānis is reading). This narrative spatiality generates a sense of temporal continuity between the transcendental presence of *Lāčplēsis* and the adventures of Jānis Vanags in the narrative switch from the mythic time of the literary epic to the filmic chronologization of recent historical and political changes in Latvia.

While reading the last available page of the literary epic (the struggle of Lāčplēsis with the Black Knight for Laimdota), Jānis imagines being transformed into a new Lāčplēsis for the sake of his nation's freedom, and the mythic hero is reincarnated in his body (the subtitles of this episode read: 'And the spirit of Lāčplēsis was reborn in Jānis Vanags'). From this moment on, Jānis is led by the spirit of Lāčplēsis in his social and gender *Bildung* from a rural farmhand to a ranked military officer, from his spontaneous, poor farmhand's resistance to the Russian punitive expedition in 1905 to a professional military career and participation in the act of the Proclamation of Independence in 1918. The mythic hero Lāčplēsis, venerated in the matrix-text of the national *sensus communis*, evolves into the endless internal and essential source, re-incarnated in many Latvian *vanagi* (*hawks* in the Latvian language) and their heroic deeds on the battlefields for the land, nation and beloved ones. On the other hand, the villainous characters (Black Knight, Russian imperial officer, German officer and black-marketeer – all played by one actor), materialize in the narration as male personifications of evil and powerful Otherness, either mythic or real, either in the past or in the future. All of them are obsessed with the sexual fantasy of conquering either the mythic Laimdota or the real Mirdza, thus representing a political and even ontological threat to the stability of the nation embodied by its women.

As a film, the matrix-text of the literary epic re-asserts its cultural respectability as, 'a prime token of authority and continuity, of closure and truth' (Hansen 1994: 144). The 'transhistorical temporal omnipresence' (Hansen 1994: 148) of its mythic characters Lāčplēsis and Laimdota is reincarnated in the fictional figures of Jānis Vanags and Mirdza. At the same time, the adventures of Jānis and Mirdza are alternated with episodes of documentary combat, the entry of the national army into Riga and the Proclamation of Independence. In the episode about the Proclamation of Independence, Jānis and Mirdza are shown sitting among the real participants in this important historical event. In this fusion of the mythic, the fictional and the real, the filmic narrative re-canonizes Pumpurs's epic and does even more. The 'copying' effect of both the real/technological/reproductive (book/film copies) and the ideal/mythic/masculine (Vanags as a 'copy' of Lāčplēsis) attaches a reifying 'aura' of mythic genealogy to its potential emplotments in real time and implies the literary myth's status as a national sublime in the cultural significations of historical contingencies and social changes.

The film's narrative starts at the castle of a German knight where the beautiful Laimdota is incarcerated. Within its walls, the mythic warrior Lāčplēsis stands against all witchcraft and resists all enemies for the sake of his beloved maiden. At the end of the opening sequence, the narrative space is switched from the mythic to the real in a close-up shot of the book with a missing page. This narrative junction produces a natural connection between the mythic and the real as it 'stitches' the epic's mythic space and plot with the homestead of the Saulītis family during the revolutionary events of 1905.² At this narrative junction we also see how the spirit of Lāčplēsis moves from the pages of the epic into the body of its reader, the young Jānis Vanags. Inspired by the epic and by Lāčplēsis's spirit, he launches his heroic *Bildung* and warns his master, the farmer Saulītis, about an approaching Russian punitive expedition. Mirdza's father manages to flee the expedition, in the last minute calling on Jānis: 'Protect the homestead!'

The castle, an alien space of evil and witchcraft, the metaphors for alien colonization and subjugation, in both the text and the film, is opposed to

2. During the 1905 Russian Revolution, there was a political and social unrest in Finland and in the Baltic provinces. There were also harsh punitive actions by the Russian imperial government after the Revolution failed.

3. For the notion of the haptic in cinema, see Giuliana Bruno (2002).

the topoi of a Latvian rural homestead. As the Latvian thinker Juris Alunāns proclaimed in the late nineteenth century, a homestead is an extension of nature and the universe, the terrain and soil of ethnic authenticity and identity, giving emotional empowerment in national emancipation (Alunāns 1861). The relationship between the mythic and the haptic³ in the episodes around Saulītis's homestead is further fostered by panoramic views of rural fields. However, these bucolic panoramas give a view and a sense of the nation scattered across the battlefields of its imperial colonizers Germany and Russia in World War I. Mirdza and her father are shown joining thousands of Latvian refugees and leaving their homestead, and a shot with Mirdza's farewell gesture to the wheat-field evokes a sense of collective memory and belonging.

This sense of collective memory and belonging generated by what Giuliana Bruno calls 'the haptic space of cinema as habitable space' (Bruno 2002: 250) is sustained throughout the narration of the film. Saulītis and Mirdza, who have lost their way, come across Jānis and his military unit. Jānis tries to help them locate their whereabouts and becomes a symbolical pathfinder by showing the political map of Latvia to them (and the film's spectators). The close-up of the map is an act of visual re-territorialization of their identities from the local to the national space. It is also a pedagogical gesture of visual literacy for the film's spectators to connect the abstracted map of the nation and the haptics of home and locality beyond the filmic diegesis.

Later in the narrative, Jānis uses binoculars during military actions, and this gesture further redraws an imaginary space of the mapped national territory and its borders (as the borders of Europe) into the object of his protecting/controlling male gaze. This cartographic/optical evolution (alien castle – native homestead – rural locality – nation-scape – border of Europe) of the narrative space is emphasized in the duet of gendered practices – an abstracted political/military mapping and a focusing/bordering male gaze. But spectators enjoy



Figure 1: Postage stamp issued by Latvia 1932 depicting a view of Riga, Latvia, which is a shot from *Lāčplēsis*.

its culmination in a focalizing shot of Riga's skyline, beneath an emerging 'divine' vision of Lāčplēšis's head in the skies, implying his transcendental presence and directing gaze.

The film sequence with a 'divine' vision of Lāčplēšis's head in the skies includes the battle scenes and liberation of Riga from aggressors. The accelerating rhythm of this filmic sequence accentuates the motive of an essential connection between the mythic (Lāčplēšis) and the somatic (Vanags and other Latvian military men), between the invisible spirit and a male body. Narrative focalizations actually build up on this emotional connection throughout the entire film, thus, turning cinematic motion into 'a haptic, affective transport', which, in Gualiana Bruno's argument, implies more than the movement of bodies and objects, as imprinted in the change of film frames and shots, the flow of camera movement, or any other kind of locomotive shift in viewpoint. Motion pictures move, not only through time and space or narrative development but also through inner space. Film moves, and fundamentally 'moves' us, with its ability to render affects and, in turn, to affect. It also moves to incorporate, and interface with, other affective spaces (Bruno 2002: 484).

The narrative-as-emotional resolution, however, is shifted from the political space of the national capital to the private one of Saulītis's rural homestead, central to the national imaginary premised upon the imposition of ethnic essentialism. In the hierarchy of visual authority, a homestead represents an ideal model and 'affective space' of social relations and functions as a metaphor for the nation state, focusing on internal purity, protection of (national/natural/gender) resources, shared social values and gender roles (Gullestad 1996, 1997).

It is the place where Jānis returns Laimdota's *sakta*⁴ to Mirdza as a major symbolic token of national womanhood. However, the romantic resolution is explicitly subordinated to Saulītis's return to his homestead as a father-figure, which is crucial for securing the continuity of the national order. He is the one who brings death to an evil enemy and he is the one who shuts the door of the room on kissing Jānis and Mirdza to protect this romantic happy ending from any alien intrusion. Rural iconography turns into an enchanted landscape, reviving the romantic notion of nature's purity and urban corruption and adhering to the stereotypical idea that village folks possess intact family structures and close social bonds, serving as a source of identity for collective as well as individual nation-ness. Furthermore, the cinematic rendering of a mythologized landscape in *Lāčplēšis* transforms the landscape from an external phenomenon to be engaged with visually into a psychic terrain of internalized symbolic meanings of gender.

Gender explicitly structures this filmic narrative of the modern nation-family's political *Bildung* within the ordering of mythic/causal/affective relations between Us and Them (Bolsheviks, Germans, Russian adventurists). Gender also inflects spectator relations between the filmic text and its audience by plot devices such as 'the princess in the castle' and 'the victim of a villain'. In the formulaic representation of ideal national femininity, the rescue scenario centres upon the figure of the virginal victim and the noble rescuer. In this representation, there is no place for ambiguous inversions, fallen women, witches or deviations from normative femininity; it is both romantic, inherited from literary texts (the princess in the castle), and dramatic, and it was employed intensively in early cinema melodramas (the victim of a villain). The two interwoven plots of both princesses/victims Laimdota (the mythic beginning in the book) and Mirdza (the real in its filmic sequelization) set a specific causal (myth-history) and affective (class-gender)

4. *Sakta* – a Latvian woman's traditional brooch.

ordering of cultural difference. They embody the principles of national identity, memory and territory, while the battle over their desired, chaste bodies is represented as men's gender essence and uniting cause.

Jānis's socially inferior status as a farmhand turns out to be insignificant in his alliance with his master, the farmer Saulītis, formed for the sake of Mirdza and national independence. In staking out a feminized affective territory for the audience, he embodies the ideal figure of the warrior, combining the values of traditional and modern masculinity codes (his peasant upbringing and professional military career). At the same time, the mythic element of his power functions as a liminal space between the supernatural and the melodramatic, a crucial underpinning to the mythic solemnity and political centrality of the love story between Jānis and Mirdza. Melodrama, in turn, with its pathos, emotionalism and moral polarization, merges into the war narrative in which the mythic 'substratum' delegates a national male body to be the site of power, truth, history-making and moral goodness.

I would emphasize here that the filmic mythologization of heroic masculinity in the spirit/body duality (the fictional Vanags and the mythic Lāčplēsis) creates a frame of reference for the historical role of the leaders of the nation introduced in the film narrative – the authoritarian president of the 1930s, Kārlis Ulmanis and the hero of the independence war Oskars Kalpaks. Opposed to them, an evil male stranger emerges in different historical guises, but with the same face, betraying the gendered essence of an eternal adversary, obsessed with the desire to own the mythic Laimdota, chaste Mirdza and pure nation-space.

The film re-claims the literary epic of *Lāčplēsis*, with its prescriptions for agency and identity, as a morally imperative meta-narrative of the nation. *Lāčplēsis* manifests what Thomas Elsaesser calls 'a dual cultural legacy' of European cinema, 'that of the 19th century novel and of the 20th century modernist avant-gardes' (Elsaesser 2000: 9). At the same time, the film became a narrative about Latvia as a modern nation state (Berger et al. 2008). The cinematic narrativization and mythologization of recent and real events (1905 Revolution, World War I, refugee and population displacements, Proclamation of Independence and military actions) creates a sense of epic pastness for the film's spectators, so essential in historicizing and nationalizing the collective perception of the recent past. In this ideological function, the film manifested a certain 'archive of human fantasies and desires [preserving] the imaginary of the past within the present' (Hake 2002: 1) as a blueprint of the future derived from the here and now.

In their didactic authority, both films, *Young Eagles* and *Lāčplēsis*, contributed to the process of privileging 'cinema's role as an agency that could recruit, codify, and circulate the cultural terms for a modern national identity' (Ricci 2007: 38). Cultural icons (the literary epic of *Lāčplēsis* or the city of Tartu) of national mobilization in the times of the Russian Empire were established in these films as the 'templates' of identity and agency to celebrate the inherent value of ethnic nation-ness and to spatialize/historicize its uniting power in the birth of the modern political nation. Grounded in these 'template' spaces, textual and urban, both filmic re-enactments of the collective past used the events of a recent independence war for structuring the culturally constructed national metanarrative. The war sequence is focalized as a narrative 'backbone' in *Young Eagles* and *Lāčplēsis* for initiating an explicitly gendered visual record of the passage of historical time and consolidation of national space. The traditional gender binary as a major ideological focalizer in both films is

also predicated on a splitting and differentiating relationship with Otherness, embodied in the sexual threat of the male figures, and enacted in history, politics and ethnicity. This filmed/fixed gender binarism of identity, agency and Otherness is also laden with a sense of its intrinsic value for 'a prefigurative self-generating nation' (Bhabha 1994: 148) as a spatial, metaphysical and transcendent authority in its encounters with liminal spaces, experiences and the imaginations of (post)modernity.

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