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Cultural imaginaries of the postcolony: a critical discourse analysis of cross-cultural references in Estonian art history through a postcolonial lens

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ABSTRACT

The article argues for an extended delineation of increasing Western cultural hegemony in the reconstituted Baltic states. An initial idiom of postcolonial studies is revisited in order to complement their dominant scope in the Baltics, focused primarily on a retrospective cultural study of Baltic/Soviet relationships. The argument elaborates on the urgency of the expanding research agenda regarding the Baltic/European research framework. By pointing out the frequent occurrence of the superiority or inferiority value scale in cross-cultural references sampled from press releases of the Art Museum of Estonia, the article concludes that mainstream cultural self-reflection in Estonia is nowadays subjected to the supremacy of the imagined West European viewpoint.

KEYWORDS

Postcolonialism; neocolonialism; Western cultural hegemony; neoliberalism; white otherness; eastern Europe; Baltic states; Estonia

This article presents the preliminary results of ongoing research (Saar 2018) on public legitimization strategies of the Estonian visual arts in current culture media. Both outcomes and origins have their theoretical premises rooted in Émile Durkheim's (1995 [1912]) cultural anthropology. Following the long line of Durkheim's adherents (e.g. Bourdieu 1993; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982; Gell 1998), its functionalist core idea was taken for granted: a collective cultural imaginary always serves to legitimize the social and economic order of the time. In a straightforward line with the assumption and limited to the discursive analysis of press releases of the Art Museum of Estonia (AME) from 2007 to 2016, its aim has been to inquire regarding any cultural legitimization of the neoliberal sociopolitical order in public cultural parlance. Given the critical reception of Baltic austerity policies in the social sciences and political economics underscoring the neoliberal character of these political means, devised and implemented to cope with economic dire straits ever since the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2007, this avenue of research looked promising (for critical reception, see Sommers and Woolfson 2014; Vihalemm, et al. 2017; Tammaru 2017).

Evidence of a conceptual family resemblance between cultural globalization and market-driven value orientations of neoliberalism has been conclusively found. The globalized art world, or the way it has been depicted in the press releases of the AME,
is favored, under the aegis of artistic liberties of personal market-oriented career-planning strategies, over any kind of social bonding, and takes for granted the idea of society’s fundamentally elusive character and an appeal for the advancement of competitive and opportunistic market-sensitive artistic practices. Some data derived from the conducted study, however, were applied to related postcolonial studies instead. In terms of political economics, the increasing accumulation of (cultural) capital in established cultural hubs of West Europe was understood and presumed in press releases of the AME. To apply it to the proper postcolonial approach, the same tacit consent, a remarkably submissive, inferiority-driven pattern of cross-cultural references, was repeatedly detected in press releases as well. It is the aim of this article to test the comprehensibility of these analytical findings using a postcolonial lens. Firstly, the initial idiom of postcolonial studies is revisited in order to demarcate the research territory of Western cultural hegemony. Secondly, a case study is conducted to form an evidence-based argument. In the concluding discussion, the findings of the case study are contextualized within the most recent comparative developments in postcolonial studies and a few suggestions are provided for practices of cultural emancipation and empowerment.

Historiography of the postcolonial: the national agent questioned

It is widely acknowledged, even beyond Estonian academic circles, quite often with grim smirks, that in the twenty-first century, a Eurocentrist turn has taken place in Estonian historiography, both in history proper and in its cousin, art history. Recent editions of these interrelated fields have radically changed the outlook of the hitherto socially shared and perceived past, have led to a large number of rather scholarly questions related to memory studies, and have added to the commencement of an ominous discourse on the post-truth era in local media. The main argument has revolved around the shifted political agency of local history and can be conceptualized loosely as a schism of ethnocentrist and Eurocentrists. To the surprise of the unsuspecting reader, competing receptions of certain medieval events have served as a boiling point dividing the two. The question of whether the period of the crusading conquest and Christianization of medieval Livonia in the thirteenth century should be narrated as an ancestral fight for freedom or as just another colonial episode in the north-east corner of Europe has produced clashing opinions. New editions reveal the shift from national to international, with the reasons grounded convincingly in the claims that neither Estonia nor its nation(s) existed at the time, let alone the liberal concept of freedom as something to fight for. Likewise, although with less media attention and fewer bayonets clashing, Estonian art history has been subjected in new issues to similar optical adjustments in terms of both scope and angle. Much of this has been re-contextualized, knitted and bent more closely into the canonical style universe of the ‘isms’ of Western modern art history. Thus, prior nationalism-tempered storylines both in history proper and in art history have been re-framed too. What was, in the Soviet era, narrated in between the lines as a story of national grit, cultural camouflage, and resistance to the Crusades or Sovietization is now dismissed from the liberal point of view as an obsolete social construct.

Nationality issues, however, seem to keep haunting both the cultural and political agendas of present-day Estonia, serving as the elephant in the room. Turning a blind eye to them comes in many forms. Liberals have not refrained from charging
nationality with being complicit with its evil twin brothers: ethnographism and essentialism. The national-minded side in turn strikes back with insinuating charges against their opponents of self-colonization and other ‘collaborationist’ sins. This article also aims to go beyond the seemingly compulsory choice between the two, and to dismiss political stigmatization and its arena in local culture media. In more productive terms, this article's objective is to inquire instead as to where the current Estonian mainstream cultural imaginary stands in this national and international schism. Does it flow in raving criticism of the national agent from the liberal point of view (Anderson 1991; Smith 1988; Gellner 2008), or does it instead provide for a more considerate rehabilitation of nationwide mindsets within preconditioned liberal margins (Calhoun 2007; Cheah 2003; Kymlicka 2001)?

Nationality seen as a derogatory stigma has its historiographical precursors in East Europe. Medieval chronicles aside, one may observe with Larry Wolff (1994) that it was in Enlightenment travel literature that the region became subject to broader mental mapping and cultural fantasies. In these, the author argues, the rubric of literature inventing the concept of underdeveloped East Europe and its civilized counterpart in the West is traceable. In it, a broader cross-referential imagery of eastern Europe took shape: a vivid mental map of a barbaric, backward area of ‘white otherness,’ populated by ill-mannered savages, yet falling short of oriental exoticism. It was then, Wolff argues, that the conceptual division of the continent into its western and eastern areas replaced the Renaissance-born cultural distinction of civilized southern Europe and barbaric northern Europe. Following Wolff’s study, Maria Todorova (1997) pointedly criticized its political consequences for the Balkans in the next two centuries. In the international policy of the time, she claims, this insidious vogue of Orientalization became a handy pretext for messianic military interventions in the Balkans, to stop ethnic cleansing, massacres of civilians, and other war atrocities. In the process, the geopolitical parlance of the time ‘invented’ the Balkan peninsula as an object of moral outrage, an isolated example of sociopathy and Hobbesian war (hence the term balkanization), and again as a retarded outskirt of Western civilization, allegedly in need of civilizing tutelage from the West.

The Balts, however, were Orientalized with a peculiar ‘boreal’ twist. As argued by Ulrika Plath (2008; 2011), in the Enlightenment-driven German colonial discourse of the eighteenth century, a certain Herderian colonial fantasy surfaced a mirage of Europe’s last savages inhabiting the Baltics, a remote boreal frontier of increasingly civic-minded Europe, a province allegedly in desperate need of redemption from local outdated tribal habits. Based on references from nineteenth century Baltic German literature in Estonia, Jaan Undusk (2014) has pondered, in terms of cultural transfer and autogenesis, the plausibility of the local Herderian ‘savage’ being redeemed in a paternal manner, as an amusing pastime of local western European cultural mainstreamers and Estophiles, as a subject worthy of attention, yet apparently lacking any national epic and falling below the stated solemnity of German culture of the time. Undusk considers that the second half of the nineteenth century testified the rising tide of Estonian national awakening to the appearance of both national epos and nation-formation aspirations. Yet, more importantly, it revealed the self-promoted gentrification of Estonians from the status of ‘white otherness’ to civilized ‘Self.’ It turned out that the national awakening inspired a modest wave of Oriental Estonian literature by assuming a certain West European viewpoint, occasionally also including a tempered loyalty to the czarist Russia of the time. Accounts of Estonian sailors
working in the region of Japan, often published in Estonian newspapers, reveal a consistency with Western mental patronage regarding the imagined Orient (Masso and Selart 2017). In these reports, Japanese cultural habits are regularly credited with a ‘peculiar’ arrangement, labeled as remarkable aberrations from the common sense of these wandering experts. This has, authors conclude, resulted in narrative emphasis on ‘otherness’ and eccentric cultural curiosity about the region, as monitored from the perceptual framework of the recently adopted West European viewpoint.

The Soviet era added its own layer of Orientalizing practices to this emerging West-centric Baltic viewpoint, this time from the continental vicinity. Yet, this addendum was only conceptualized as such quite recently. The Baltic/Soviet framework seems to be accommodated within the postcolonial research perspective along with an anthropology of the comparative literature scholar David Chioni Moore’s (2001) suggestion that ‘postcolonial’ also includes ‘post-Soviet.’ The last dozen years have testified to the historiographical takeover of the Baltic/Soviet cultural past in a respective manner. The applicability of the postcolonial angle in the mentioned framework is now given considerable attention by many authors from different fields and carries suggestive implications for the historiography of the whole of Soviet-era eastern Europe (Annus 2017a; also Krikmann and Olesk 2003; Kelertas 2006; Methis 2011; Methis 2017; Annus 2016). It now appears that the Soviet-era Baltic cultures tacitly distinguished themselves from anything east of them. So, for instance, by analyzing through a postcolonial lens, the exoticizing depictions of central Asian Soviet republics in the travelogues of Latvian writers of the 1960s, the time of the ‘Thaw,’ Maija Burima (2016) agrees with her colleague, the Estonian literary expert Epp Annus, ‘One doesn’t have to be a colonizer to produce orientalist discourse and to “exoticize” the other culture; the same patterns can also be found in the encounter of culturally different colonized cultures.’

**De-colonial amendments**

I could not agree more with Burima. A certain weakness for European customs, or what was perceived as such, has been inherent in Baltic cultures for centuries, along with concurrent habits of inventing an imaginary ‘otherness’ for the Orient. Yet in my view this inclination is exactly why postcolonial studies should be applied to the Baltics in a somewhat orthodox manner, namely by establishing an original agenda of postcolonial studies: Western cultural hegemony in its historical provinces. A pair of amplifying amendments serves this cause. These, even if already approved in theory by the Baltic reception of postcolonial studies, have not yet quite made it to the empirical field studies of the present cultural lifeworld here.

Firstly, Orientalization is not a thing of the past, but is still taking place. This complementary thesis has arisen from a cluster of somewhat hesitant yet urgent questions. For example: what happened to Moore’s inclusive and pan-colonial emphasis on also bridging ‘postcolonial’ with ‘post-Soviet’? Why has the suggested conceptual affinity between the two been almost burned to the ground in the Baltic academic marketplace and why has the notion of ‘postcolonial’ been reforged to predominantly signify bygone Soviet times? Why, a quarter of century after the demise of the Soviet regime, is the rise to prominence of postcolonial studies in the Baltics, either in its affiliation to the poststructuralist vein of Homi Babha (1994) Gayatri Spivak (see Landry and MacLean 1996; Spivak 1999) or to more recent suprahistorical
concepts of coloniality by Osterhammel (2005), Mignolo (2011), and Moore (2001), still mostly limited to the passéist interest range of Sovietology? Could it be that this is where Baltic postcolonial studies have been left stranded, in the ‘cultural turn’ of Cold War Sovietology (for a lengthy discussion of these questions, see Annus 2011, 2017a)? If so, should we admit the political bias of the dominant research agenda?

This bias seems to me a matter of the timeframe. The recent Eurocentrist turn in historiography provides evidence that the years 1989–1991 now mark the new conceptual rupture between the Soviet past and the capitalist present, sparing the latter almost entirely from the postcolonial approach to which the former is subjected. With only a few exceptions, Baltic academics have turned a blind eye to the perceptual boundaries of liberal West-centrism in the Baltic viewpoint, whence the orientalization of both Soviet heritage and nationalist resistance to it has been implemented. To cast light on the subject, I propose to focus on a passage from Moore’s (2001, 120) suggestion, the one dissenting from the general Baltic reception: the ‘postcolonial desire from Riga to Almaty fixes not on the fallen master Russia but on the glittering Euramerican MTV-and-Coca-Cola beast that broke it. Central and eastern Europeans type this desire as a return to Westernness that once was theirs.’ It is decreed here, among other things, that postcolonial research should be expanded beyond the above-mentioned conceptual threshold in time into post-1989 eastern Europe. The opposite, however, seems to be the case in the Baltic postcolonial reception. It remains to be seen whether Baltic scholars have invented the Soviet empire as an isolated example of moral outrage. And if so, to whom do they owe their moral calling?

Secondly, instead of a conceptual rupture between the past and present, I will argue for continuity, complicity, and commensurability between the two (for this supported in theory but abandoned for an empirical focus on the Soviet era, see Annus, 20187b). I claim, based on the premise of memory studies and mnemohistory, that it takes a certain kind of society to produce certain kinds of sociocultural perceptions of the past. The two are usually intertwined enough to make any radical distinction between them as a challenging enterprise if not a speculative enterprise. Moreover, they are mutually constitutive (Halbwachs 1980; Assmann 1997; Assmann 2011; Tamm 2013). Hence, the past is always invented in the present; it is constantly revised in accordance with the current ideological needs of a particular society or social class. In my opinion, this applies to more scholarly attempts to revise history too. Yet, even if Baltic postcolonial studies also include the anti-essentialist truism that colonialism is not a matter of steady binary oppositions, but rather a shaky playground of contingent identities and multivocality, the mentioned radical dichotomy of past and present remains. Thereby, studies on socially constructed cultural identities in the Baltics predominantly focus on the realm of the colonial past(s) and to rapidly lessening extent similar colonial affairs in the present liberal world of economics, ‘socialia,’ and culture inter alia. With tunnel vision and myopia in problem setting, this gaze illuminates the national agent as a rogue elephant. By bringing it to a qui bono question in the critical reception of neoliberalism, denying a nation(-state) political agency fits far too conveniently with the tacit moral strictures of the otherwise open-minded and tolerant multiculturalist jargon of West-centric globalization, leaving only the latter on the table, while pathologizing the former as a moral mistake (Calhoun 2007; for his well-received point in the Baltic/European framework, see Peiker 2016).
De-colonial projects every now and then come with the prefix ‘neo-’ instead of ‘post.’
The prefix is temporal: ‘We live in neocolonial, not postcolonial, times …’ It is, ironically, in
this conspicuously neocolonial environment that the countervailing term ‘postcolonial’
is achieving widespread currency (Huggan 1997, 19–20). Walter Mignolo substantiates
the claim theoretically, based on his expertise in Latin American colonial legacy, with an
explicit disclaimer: ‘Conceptually, the “post” keeps you trapped in unipolar time concep-
tions. As far as for Western (since the Renaissance) cosmology “time” is one, singular and
universal, you have no way out: you are trapped in a universal time that is owned by a
particular civilization’ (Mignolo 2017; see the argument developed in Mignolo 2011; also
Mignolo and Escobar 2010). Together with the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano
(2010), Mignolo authored the sweeping epistemological concept of Western modernism
and colonialism being two sides of the same coin. Quijano and Mignolo hold that ever
since the Renaissance, the Western concept of time has been an all-pervasive intellectual
tool for converting global geography into a global evolutionist chain, overlapping with a
Hegelian progressivist chronology. In this colonial geography, the Eurocentrist segreg-
tion between modern metropolises and traditional outskirts is invoked, with the latter
allegedly entangled in the traditional cultural habits of bygone times. Thereby, they
claim, a planetary order of discrimination between cultures is suggested, according to
their alleged rank in the evolutionary chain. In the collateral conceptual rupture between
the present and past, it is West Europe’s self-promoted prerogative to speak for the
former, while insinuating a lag in progress in the rest of world. By this distinction and
manner of speaking, traveling backward in time is made possible, or so we are told, by
moving from European cultural hubs towards their stigmatized margins, ‘made famous’
by centers for their traditional, if not tribal modus vivendi.

My second amendment owes its theoretical posture to more recent African colonial
studies. In the anti-essentialist vein of Homi Bhabha (1994) and Gayatri Spivak (1999),
Achille Mbembe (1992; 2001) contributes to the idea of a precarious and kaleidoscopic
colonial subject, based on his knowledge of the colonial legacy of Sub-Saharan states of
Africa (Cameroon, Togo, and Congo). The point of departure here is Fanon’s (1963, 100)
well-known dictum that colonialism does not come to an end with the declaration of
political independence, or with the symbolic lowering of the last European flag. Mbembe
makes a plea instead for continuity and causal consistency between colonial society and
its heir, the postcolony, where the prior matrix of power is replicated in a national culture
elevated to a grotesque Bakhtinian carnival, to the clashing multitude of several public
spaces and cultural identities, cohabited in elusive, yet competitive liaisons. Here, in a
hectic chain of daily interactions, both state and society are subject to constant traves-
ties, and become the objects of popular jest regarding officialdom or else the rude
banality of state interventions in people’s lives. Here, in mutually mirrored illocutions, any
identity is undermined and dragged into the struggle of competing stigmas, signification
strategies, and playful adaptions. Contingency is elevated to an anthropological require-
ment, it seems: ‘[…] subjects in the postcolony have also had to have a marked ability to
manage not just a single identity for themselves but several, which are flexible enough
for them to negotiate as and when required’ (Mbembe 1992, 5). Parallels to constant
classification warfare between ‘xenophobic nationalists’ and ‘collaborationist self-
colonizers’ in current Estonia cannot be missed.
The Estonian case

Fanon’s above-mentioned dictum could have been devised for the Baltic circumstances, where colonization did not come to an end with the raising of the first European Union flag. Quite the contrary, Western cultural hegemony may have gained more solid ground (for this considered briefly, see Moore 2001; Annus 2011). With Wolff’s (1994) and Todorova’s (1997) studies on the imagined geographies of eastern Europe revisited, a more detailed account of Western cultural hegemony can be outlined. In line with the neocolonial approach of Mignolo and Quijano, Piotr Piotrowski relates this effort to issues pertaining to the West-centric geography of modern art. Piotrowski addresses the historiographic sense of geography in Western treatments of the topic, or the lack of it, to be precise. Based on how eastern Europe is profiled in the textbook Art since 1900 (Foster, et al. 2004), as well as in Western art history in general, he distinguishes between ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ art history. Piotrowski (2009) describes the former as the hitherto habitual way of writing art history. Here a particular Western stylistic canon of modern art is launched as a normative universal, and ‘(t)he arts from other peripheral regions, however, are presented as fragments of the global or universal art history established in the West...’ And more to the point:

Due to the ideology of the universalism of modern art, the historian of the center, often quite unconsciously, tends to ignore the significance of place, thus becoming an instrument of colonization... This reveals tensions of a geographical kind: on the one hand, there are Paris and later New York as international centers of culture, on the other, regional capitals placed in national contexts, such as Belgrade, Copenhagen, Oslo, Prague, Vilnius. Obviously, in the hierarchy of art historical narratives, the former are highly appreciated, while the latter are often underrated or ignored (Piotrowski 2009; 55, 56; see Piotrowski’s and Moore’s point emphatically deliberated but converted to suit the Baltic/Soviet framework in Kangilaski 2016).

A tendency to adjust oneself to this colonial geography is conceptualized as self-colonization by Alexander Kiossev (1999). The concept’s similarity to Gramscian discussions of cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1971; Arendt 1970; Althusser 1971) is insistent enough to see it as a Bulgarian offshoot of the kind, even if prone to fatalism and essentialism. Thus, Kiossev (1999, 114) conceptualizes eastern European ‘white otherness’ as a self-inflicted trauma, engendered willy-nilly constitutive to one’s own culture, and allegedly evident in the nineteenth century wave of Bulgarian nation formation:

Thus, in the genealogical knot of the Bulgarian national culture there exists the morbid consciousness of an absence – a total, structural, non-empirical absence. The Others – i.e. the neighbors, Europe, the civilized World, etc. – possess all that we lack; they are all that we are not. The identity of this culture is initially marked, and even constituted by, the pain, the shame – and to formulate it more generally – by the trauma of this global absence. The origin of this culture arises as a painful presence of absences and its history could be narrated, in short, as a centuries-old effort to make up for and eliminate the traumatic absences. I wonder whether it is not possible to call such cultures self-colonizing?

The year 2006 provided an answer from Estonia. A treatment on local literary history was published, where the self-colonization concept was applied to note an active and acknowledged top-down policy from 1920. The literary elite associated with the Noor-Eesti (Young Estonia) group allegedly tried to impose European cultural standards upon the local, supposedly scandalously lagging
culture, and this by openly messianic means (Hennoste 2006; conditionally supported by Kangilaski 2016).

**Cultural discourses of the Estonian postcolony**

In the following, some prior research questions related to criticism of neoliberal culture are rephrased in order to coincide with Piotrowski’s idea of horizontal art history (as opposed to the vertical; see above) and its deconstructive focus on a close rereading of the Western idiom of art history from the de-colonial perspective:

A horizontal art history should begin with the deconstruction of vertical art history, that is, the history of Western art. A critical analysis should reveal the speaking subject: who speaks, on whose behalf, and for whom? This is not to cancel Western art history, but to call this type of narrative by its proper name, precisely as a “Western” narrative (Piotrowski 2009; 54; also Belting 2003).

Based both on Piotrowski’s persistent focus on biased depictions of space in Western universalist historiography and on Mignolo’s concept of Western time counting turned to a global tool of cultural discrimination, I followed their appeal to deconstructivist geography and devised my own cluster of discursive research questions out of the related premises of cultural geography, postcolonial literary studies, and memory studies. In these lines of research, oral, written, or visual, discourse is understood as a cultural metaphor for social order preferred or taken for granted, and precisely thereby reproduced. Out of the rephrased research questions, three of these helped to validate the de-colonial amendments proposed above:

1. In what spatial terms is the environment around visual art practices depicted in press releases of the AME? Here, a methodological concept of the culturescape was applied in order to analyze the culture-dependent sense of space in press communication. Along the theoretical guidelines of cultural geography with occasional Marxist leanings (Clark 1973; Mitchell 1996; Cosgrove 1984), any deictic reference to surrounding space, delimiting spatial frames, panorama, or outlook related to visual art practices was read as reminiscence regarding some particular social order tacitly legitimized. Based on these discourse elements, more conclusive deductions were made about the general habits of observing and mainstreamed ways of spatial perception in a particular society (see the concept of *period eye* in the historiography of art; Baxandall 1972).

2. In what temporal terms is the environment around visual art practices depicted in press releases of the AME? Here, the methodological concept of chronotope from the literature studies of Mikhail Bakhtin (2003) was applied in order to detect a suggested temporal order or historical sequence of artistic practices in press releases. These observations on temporality are, in research results, subsumed to the more theoretical concept of ‘prevailing’ Western regimes of historicity authored by François Hartog (2015). Here, obviously by running the risk of universalism, dominant Western sensations of time are broken down into three prevalent regimes of historicity: premodernism, modernism, and presentism. I have elaborated on these below when evidence in press releases is provided.

3. What is the subject position provided for visual artists in press releases of AME? Here, any predication applied in press releases to portray artistic activities was
collected to provide evidence to help to profile a legitimate mainstream agency of Estonian culture. More in the vein of Durkheimian sociology, the preliminary methodological concept of subject position from discourse analysis was augmented by the idea of job vacancies in the mainstream culture industry to be filled by aspiring artists (Bourdieu 1993; for subject position in discourse analysis, Fairclough 1989).

Given the limits of this paper, I will provide some answers by occasionally collapsing the issue of perceived time frames into ones of space, given their obvious interrelatedness in press releases. Thereby time-spatial frames of visual art practices will be discussed together under the methodological concept of culturescape. Yet, more needs to be said about the sample of this research. By favoring press releases over oeuvres of professional (art) history, one additional shift in perspective, this time from humanitarian outlooks to those of cultural sociology and media studies, has been initiated. The pretext is obvious. It is rather simplified journalistic storylines destined and delivered to wider museum audiences via public channels of cultural communication that draw on popular imaginaries, yet also profoundly shape these socially shared vistas, imagined or not. By their relatively wider circulation, these public narratives testify to governing self-reflection patterns in culture and contribute more effectively to social control, legal cultural identity formation, and citizen obedience than any academic revision (regarding museums in ideological work, see Althusser 1971; Bourdieu, Darbel, and Schnapper 1991; Bennett 1995). Hence, there is a tendency to study press releases for the mainstream protocols of social behavior and constraint. As to the AME itself, it is taken for granted in the following that this state-funded and largest art institution in Estonia is one of the flagships of Estonia’s current mainstream culture. Therefore, the aim is to examine its press releases to discover dominant discourses of Estonian culture in general.

**Results**

A preliminary study quickly established a diversity of cultural value orientations in the AME’s press communication. Different exhibitions, artistic, and curatorial practices were presented to audiences via remarkable changes in discursive conventions. It was likewise easy to determine certain regularity and patterns in the variety. I regimented them to three well-travelled concepts of ethnocentrist, Eurocentrist, and globalist culture. The boundaries between these three were vague, yet references to any of them seemed to exhaust pretty much all of the resources of cultural legitimization available to cultural producers in twenty-first century Estonia. What was revealed later was certain submissiveness to imagined European or global cultural guidelines, and a haughty communicative distance in references to Soviet heritage or the ethnic origin of Estonians. Even though it was to be expected that a museum professionally involved in the production of contemporary arts had developed a somewhat stiff upper lip regarding bygone times, the strictly stipulated perceptual regime of time and space was striking enough to call to mind the de-colonial amendments mentioned above. Roughly put, all three cultural discourses were found to be at least partly susceptible to Eurocentrism and evolutionist time counting. Due to the limitations of this article,
I will elaborate on only the discursive profiles of ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism, and make only a few passing remarks about cultural globalization.

**Ethnocentrist culture discourse: borealism revisited**

*Culturescape.* The ethnocentrist culturescape of Estonia and the respective sense of surrounding space features in press releases as a discourse of deictic distinctions between ‘own’ and ‘foreign.’ Out of these conceptual oppositions, a peculiar mental map of Estonia has been forged, dominated by the national romanticist myth of Estonian ‘domestic soil.’ This subject matter is connoted, so it reads, to have local artistic traditions rooted in it, hence the alleged essential difference between the frequently mentioned ‘own’ and ‘foreign.’ In addition, there is evidence of natural determinism involved in the ethnocentrist reality profile. Compared either with nineteenth century national romanticism or Baltic German romanticism with a Eurocentrist bent from the same period, a fair share of belletrist figures of speech, a distinct sub-discourse in both art historical chapters, corroborate the idea of culture being entirely dependent, and conditioned by Estonia’s immediate natural environment, climate, and particularities of the seasonal cycle at this latitude.

The ethnocentrist culturescape and respective cultural self-description, however, is not clearly manifest in press releases. The cultural self-determination of present-day Estonia cannot be attributed solely to its immediate natural environment, even with conceptual distinctions between ‘homeland soil’ and ‘foreign countries’ featuring legally in the context of artistic practices. Especially when compared to both Eurocentrist and globalist discourse, one has to argue instead for a certain critical ambience in the temporal framing policies of ethnocentrism. One may even argue that ethnocentrist value orientations are a valid part of the current cultural mainstream only when placed within certain strict temporal frames. These are legitimate issues to be touched upon only in retrospect and as an issue of nineteenth century nation-building. Namely, a cognitive map of Estonia in its ethnocentrist edition is exclusively restricted to a limited episode in bygone times. Imagined or not, fictitious or factual, it is suggested in press releases that a socially shared conviction *ethnos* and *natura* represented sources of cultural legitimization in the past but not anymore. Ambivalence is inevitable now. It is suggested to the reader that any rhetoric of ingrained cultural habits and their ancient pedigree are entitled to operate within temporal margins. What Hartog (*2015*) called the pre-modern regime of historicity has been observed in press releases noted as an obsolete modus vivendi prevalent at the beginning of cultural time counting. As mentioned above, in this modus vivendi, culture is allegedly embedded and dependent on an immediate natural enclave, but the very *modus* itself is insistently framed in present cultural timing as a mindset peculiar to a certain ‘golden era,’ to be remembered but also musealized. National awakening, nation building, and aspirations for political self-determination are articulated in current press releases as crucial matters of the nineteenth century, and it is therefore implied that they should stay there, illuminated by retrospective light. This said, the ethnocentrist chronotope is alleged in press releases to have reached its end. This, it is suggested, took place around the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, with the *Noor-Eesti* group in literature and its related allies in visual arts taking over the scene through openly Eurocentrist cultural policies (now also notorious for being authoritarian and top down; see Hennoste *2006*). In conjunction with this
temporal limit, it is taken for granted in press releases that any tendency to elevate the nation to the main agency of culture is a part of this outdated realm too.

As for the Eurocentrism ingrained in the ethnocentrist culturescape, it is striking that the Estonian culturescape is perceived to constitute just a marginal outpost of a larger primordial panorama unfolding in press releases from the eastern border of Estonia to Finland, the Åland Islands, Sweden, and Norway, yet also extending over larger areas of northern Europe. This northern spatial sensibility is constantly evoked in press releases regarding a culturally relevant context in national romanticist artistic practices of the last third of the nineteenth century, as well as the first Modernist breakthroughs in the first decade of the twentieth century. Based on this observation, I have gathered evidence to substantiate the concept of aspiring Scandinavism in the Estonian cultural mainstream, more apparent in a primordial sense of geography in Estonian ethnocentrism. The perceptional link to borealism, once evident in the Baltic German colonial discourse of the eighteenth century (see Plath 2008; Plath 2011), is still evident, yet now paired with the idea of Estonia placed culturally on the southern edge of Scandinavia instead of the northern limit of continental Europe. Either way, ‘boreality’ is the dominant cultural trademark.

Before giving examples, one has to indicate first an evident aesthetic cohesion between the depictions of Scandinavian and Estonian culturescapes. Both are delivered to potential exhibition visitors in lyro-epic hymns to the solemnity of northern nature. The respective belletrist fragments of this spatial panorama from Estonia are maybe less exuberant in wording and quite often illuminated through the melancholic prism of cultural traumas supposedly inflicted on this natural entity in the 1940s by the Soviet occupation. Yet, broadly speaking, the lyro-epic idyll is delivered in the same way to the reader both in Scandinavia and in Estonia. While inviting audiences to an exhibition of Estonian jewelry art, the accompanying press release relies on a lyro-epic depiction of Estonia:

Mighty boulders and seashore rocks polished by waves, fossils in limestone, or in roadside pebbles enchant us with their mightiness and staggering interplay of form and color. Stone sensations are caught in photos, brought into landscaping designs, and miniature forms of stones are often collected for memorabilia (AME 2007a).

It figures that both biomorphism and animism surface in ethnocentrism. Estonia’s domestic soil is arguably alive; human, mostly maternal, qualities have been attributed to it ever since artistic practices have been claimed to be rooted there. Apart from belonging to the domestic soil, they are poetically said to appear from the ‘bosom of Estonia’ or from the ‘womb of the Livonian Gulf’ (AME 2014d). Yet, adjectives and predicates become more flamboyant and even militantly convoluted with territorial demarcations of culture reaching Scandinavia and northern Europe.

Finland:

In the last decade of the century, a quest for one’s roots in Carelian villages, the idea of national integrity and insurgency against Russian political restraint mingled in Finnish art. All of this… came about due to an increasing interest in the spiritual realm of the human being. The barren winter landscape, primordial woods, myths, and folk tales: in these the symbols needed for nation-building and national awakening were searched for (AME 2008b).
Normandy:

It was right here that a delicate cohabitation of art people and locals in a daily standoff with the sublime yet often gloomy nature, harsh reality and hard work took shape (AME 2009b).

With similar fragments gathered from Åland, Sweden, and Norway, a reader cannot help but succumb to the looming imagery of the ‘breathtaking, beautiful, grand, and vigorous majesty of northern nature’ (AME 2014b). In brief, they result in the legitimization of the Estonian culturescape within the larger northern European spatial deixis, even if this is off its alleged boreal highways and less expressive in lyro-epic terms. What is more, the reader of press releases cannot help feeling a wistful sense of loss induced by the temporal frames applied. A sense of a mental bond to nature’s majesty is suggested as disappearing in subsequent times of rapid modernization. Hence, there is an air of anachronism and retrospection around the concomitant ethnocentrist value orientations, even if featured via nostalgia for a lost ‘golden era’ (AME 2014a).

**Cultural agent**

Visual artists, considered to be ethnocentrists, mostly those with an established national romanticist orientation, were said in press releases to have been completely ‘enchanted by the majesty of northern nature.’ They are also, in a somewhat populist manner, attributed humble social origins and egalitarian senses of community with ‘simple, hardworking people’ (AME 2009b). Apart from these narrative story lines indicating the ideals of imagined pre-modern communities, it is also characteristic of the ethnocentrist sample that it is subject to a certain discursive pressure from a more openly Modernist and Eurocentrist self-description of the Estonian mainstream. Namely, ethnocentrist artists seem to participate in the current mainstream only to be publicly overridden by more universal Modernist value orientations. Or at least their public discursive profile is twofold, constantly bifurcated between ethnocentrist and Eurocentrist patterns, adding even more contingency to its challenged reputation as an obsolete cultural construct: ‘Such terms as idyll, mythological realm and spiritual landscape, which can be applied to Kaljo Põllu’s prints, all refer to French, Lithuanian and Finnish symbolism from around 1900. Põllu, however, remained true to domestic realities’ (AME 2013b).

Thus, if not put into this kind of oscillating dual perspective of both national romanticism and the Modernist-style universe, artists with ethnocentrist reputations are due more determined transitions in public reception. Kristjan Raud and his twin brother Paul, for example, acclaimed in Soviet-era Estonia officially for taking an interest in the lives of peoples of ‘proletarian origin,’ were also credited with a hidden agenda. Namely, it was understood implicitly that they were to be celebrated primarily for their contributions to the first illustrated edition of the national epos, *Kalevipoeg* (*Kalev’s Son*). Yet, in current press releases their public profile has changed. A stronger emphasis on the textbooks of Western Modernism is obvious, turning both the artists and their illustrations for *Kalevipoeg* into subjects for an international artistic style book:

The art works of the twin brothers Kristjan and Paul Raud, founders of Estonian national art, are quite familiar to Estonians, primarily due to the illustrations for *Kalevipoeg*. Over the years, however, the point of view on the visual arts of the beginning of the twentieth century has changed. Nowadays, substantial revisions and reassessments have been instigated. The symbolism of the end of the nineteenth century and of the beginning of the
The exhibition focuses not so much on the national romantic vein in Kristjan Raud’s creations. Instead, it presents his oeuvre in its entirety as a peculiar symbolism. Paul Raud, whose art works have been until now treated more in a traditional manner, stands out as a more versatile artist: a modern painter from the beginning of the twentieth century (AME 2006b).

This shows that in press releases ethnocentric artists were framed as both founders of national visual culture and pioneers of local Modernist traditions, ‘pathfinders, father figures of Estonian art history, predecessors ingrained in Estonian culture memory’ (AME 2013a; also AME 2010a). With or without Modernist interdiscursive pressure, the only fundamental subject position available in press releases is that of the traditionalist and nationwide cultural hero in transition, i.e. to be accommodated more properly within the artistic style markers of canonical Western Modernism. Paradoxically, calling somebody a predecessor serves as an emphasis on his or her irrelevance in current contemporary artistic practices, again by referring to a peculiar retrospective time frame.

**Eurocentrist culture discourse: metropolises spotted**

*Culturescape*

It is through recurrent distinctions between ‘provinces’ and ‘metropolises’ that the Eurocentrist spatial bias is forged in press releases. With all of these deictic distinctions recollected and assembled into a meta-narrative, another, competing culture-dependent sense of space emerges, evoking the supremacist myth of Occidental culture standing for the ultimate hub of ecumenical civilization. Press releases introducing the Estonian reader to Western Modernism manifest certain conformity to the centralist cartography of European culture, suggesting its twofold division into ‘core cultures’ in western (also partly central) Europe and its antipodes, ‘border cultures’ situated along the established perimeter of the ecumen. Estonia, along with many of its geographical neighbors, is an eastern province of Europe, where such notions as ‘European culture,’ ‘European values,’ and ‘European art history’ are occasionally elevated to signify culture, ‘our’ values and art history in general, or so it appears in press releases. This discursive augmentation of a particular geographical culture into a universal umbrella term of culture is not yet provided to the reader as a declarative conversion of the former into the latter. It is rather occasionally occurring compatibility logic of sequenced sentences and their syntax that testifies that quite often the particular and universal are alternately either merged or distinguished, yet, always associated with each other.

The location of European culture is not unanimously agreed upon in Estonian Eurocentrism. The above-mentioned hub of civilization floats around depending on whether the Baltic German culturescape, or a more Francophile and Modernist one, is the focus. The two mentioned are interrelated in evolutionist temporal terms. The Baltic German culturescape is said to have run its course by the end of the nineteenth century, along with Estonian national romanticism a decade later and local Modernist streams taking over the scene afterwards.
In the Baltic German culture discourse, lyro-epic genre means are again applied in order to narrate what happens when the domestic soil is left behind. Press releases willingly resort to the narrative tone of nineteenth century romanticist travel diaries and literature, thus succumbing to the idea that instead of foreign ground it may result in arrival at the cradle of civilization, this time with no strings attached to nationality.

Italy:

[W]here grandiose, breath-taking nature and the scent of civilization were interwoven, and both the soul and mind were nurtured. Italy was a destination where one's sense of history and taste in the arts could be cultivated, besides contemplating and purchasing art works that were believed to maintain their value permanently... From Estonia, as from anywhere else, artists were seduced to Italy by the mild climate, beautiful nature and classical civilization. Italy was the meeting place of the past and eternity, whence mental radiance beamed all over the distant borders of Europe. ... Italy acted as the contact zone, where geographically and historically detached personal life trajectories collided. By means of the foreign, oneself and one's homeland were contemplated and given meaning (AME 2009a).

Switzerland:

[T]he picturesque highland scenes provided an inspiration both to artists and writers. Switzerland became an ideal, the yardstick to evaluate the beauty of Estonian and Livonian nature or to criticize societal affairs over here (AME 2008a).

Baltic German romanticism is presented to the reader with its passéist and idealized view of the European cultural past emphasized. It is this imagined vista on the sublime cultural past of West Europe that serves as a benchmark instigating both a sense of cultural supremacy and provincial inferiority. Apart from geographical distance, a somewhat decadent timeframe of culture is also implied, one that may as well toll out an ethnocentrist affiliation to imagery of a vanished golden era. Yet, instead of the majesty of northern nature, it is the ‘appeal and enchantment of artistic masterpieces of long bygone times’ that supposedly mesmerize Estonia’s local artists now, not to mention ‘an eternal light’ emanating from these sublime art works ever since the dawn of the Italian Renaissance all over Europe (AME 2006c; AME 2014e). Contrary to ethnocentrism, Estonia did not feature as a self-sufficient culturescape in Baltic German discourse. Instead, the idea of new soil yet to be cultivated according to cultural templates of the Italian Renaissance is emphasized. Estonia’s self-identification as a peripheral province is once more legitimized. Even though the German Baltic cultural discourse is framed in press releases to take the ‘blame’ for it, that good old nationalist ‘we’ versus ‘them’ opposition is not communicated. Quite to the contrary, public presentations of both ethnocentrist national romanticism and Baltic German Eurocentrist romanticism are likewise hybrid in nature. Similar rhetorical means are applied to convince the reader of the legitimacy of both. Namely, terminologically rigid art historical insights are either way occasionally tempered with more or less melodramatically convoluted figures of belles-lettres, alluding to the affective spiritual catharsis involved in exhibition visits.

Yet, the range of suspects involved in the discursive self-provincialization of Estonia is about to enlarge. The Eurocentrist sample of press releases is composed of two competing concepts of Europe. Another one makes an entrance in press releases some time around the first decades of the twentieth century and presents the reader with the more modernist and Francophile aspirations of artists and publicists.
associated with the *Noor-Eesti* group. Still, as with Baltic German Eurocentrism, Estonia is engaged in their agenda as new soil yet to be cultivated, but this time with seeds from the Parisian modernist art scene. The transition from Baltic German spheres of influence to the Parisian sphere is proposed for the reader’s acceptance as an ‘adventurous journey’ from one’s ‘own’ vernacular culture to more international Parisian ‘innovative art,’ as personified in the character of the artist Ants Laikmaa. It is revealing that he is introduced to the reader ‘as one of the most outstanding pastel painters in Europe of his time’ (AME 2015). Apparently, to the perceptive reader, the relocation in space led to a respective relocation in time. Francophile Europe is believed to be on the cutting edge of ongoing innovations, while Estonia is gently chronicled for a lag in progress.

The romanticist concept of the wandering journey is but reduced to a more definite route from Estonia to Paris in the modernist culture discourse. Along has come a respectively changed relationship to nature and the surrounding environment. It reads more hectically now, elusive, and lacunal. Wanderers are turned now to more destination-oriented passengers, as exemplified in the phrase ‘our men of letters and arts’ (*meie vaimuünimestest* in Estonian), making Åland, once acclaimed for its primordial majesty, just a stopover en route to Paris, also suitable quite conveniently for recreation and summer camping:

Quite a few of our cultural people moved abroad after the events of the 1905 revolution. Thus, Finland became a salient stopover and study camp for those aiming at European cultural hubs, above all Paris. The immediate interaction with Europe instigated a deliberate and rapid modernization of Estonian culture during the times of Young Estonia at the beginning of the twentieth century, which is when the Åland period occurred. Åland remained a stunning summer camping destination for young artists and writers in more recent times (AME 2006a).

It is Paris now in the imagined center of cultural fantasies of the mainstream and it epitomizes ‘rapid modernization’ in contrast to the cradles of civilization. Lofty northern panoramas have receded and reduced to spatial fragments sequenced biographically in artistic residency trips. A collective sense of belonging to a shared rural space has disappeared in a modernist culturescape, while a strongly personal and urban outlook emerged. In the chronotope of the 1930s, Paris is already acutely articulated and taken for granted as the ultimate ‘hub of modern civilization.’ Estonia is seconding to this outlook with even more provincial self-description. The word ‘slum’ is mentioned as part of a legitimate ‘ownership,’ yet from both perspectives the ‘anonymous drift of urban life’ is proposed for the major artistic agenda:

Tartu and Paris became definitive borders of geographical and artistic reach in the life of both [Andrus] Johani and [Kaarel] Liimand. The city views of both artists testify to profound knowledge of the topography of the city and its various appearances. They have witnessed to both its Apollonian outlooks, in the classicist architecture of Tartu University, and its Dionysian drive, in its slums. The Paris trip in 1937 took them to the center of civilization. The city shifted their outlook higher, in every sense of the word. In their Parisian city views, anonymously drifting city life experience was mediated (AME 2006d).

**Cultural agent**

Within the established modernist and mostly Francophile culturescape, a new and socially distinct status group operates, yet seamlessly mingled with it. It is articulated as a somewhat elitist upper class of ‘our men of letters and arts’ (*meie vaimuünimesed*)
(see above, AME 2006a) or ‘national intelligentsia’ (AME 2013a). In addition to standing apart from the working class, standing above it was it is also implied, supposedly mandated to represent ‘us’ and ‘our’ cultural interests. By the purely grammatical deictics applied, a supposedly nationwide shared sense of space is invoked, where cultural agendas are brought up with the following Eurocentrist bias:

Nikolai Triik (1884–1940) was one of the most prominent Estonian modernists. The life and artistic career of the epitome of the young newcomers in Estonian cultural life at the beginning of the twentieth century indicate clearly the ideals and established hopes aimed for outside of the province. Triik’s arrival in Estonian art coincided with the time of the ideals of Young Estonia, when the group of intellectuals acknowledged the lagging behind of Estonian culture and established the goal of delivering a European mindset to Estonia (AME 2014c).

In the quoted passage and others similar in spirit, all deictic gestures are executed from the imagined common viewpoint of Estonian culture. A certain local spatial angle is proposed to be taken for granted along with its open self-stigmatization as provincial, whereas many cultural actions appear in it as arrival, entrance or delivery. It is presumed in the press release, for instance, that the reader perceives the beginning of the artistic career of Nikolai Triik as an arrival and not a departure. Moreover, his generation is mentioned to be young and attributed ‘new ideals and hopes,’ all marketed to the reader as the ‘European mindset.’ Yet, in the press release the latter is told to meet the local culture ‘lagging behind’ at its arrival. All told, it is sufficiently revealed in the press release who stands for the present, future, and progress, and who stands in their way. More to the point of geography turned to the evolutionist distinction of province and metropolis, Paris is frequently suggested as lying ‘over there,’ in a place where Estonian modernists intermittently reside and where they, it is mentioned repeatedly, were being built up as true artists. Estonian soil does not receive much credit for giving birth to artistic practices. It is rather outlined as a recipient culture, subject to the messianic mission of European or Parisian modernism, which is assumed to ‘have brought about a breakthrough’ in the local ‘academic’ art scene in the 1920s. It goes without saying that the event itself was (and still is) to be welcomed:

One may argue that it was in Paris that Koort came of age as an artist, while residing over there the longest of all of the Estonian artists: ten years. In national art history he is but one of the outstanding sculptors whose art brought about a breakthrough in the previously academic Estonian sculpture (AME 2013a).

The nation, as understood in Eurocentrist modernism, is not granted primordial self-sufficiency. It is first, a nationwide dynamic civilization project, trying to mold a ‘cultured’ society out of ethnic raw material (for competing theoretical angles on the issue, see Smith 1988; Gellner 2008). Once again, Europe can be detected in press releases as playing the mentoring role in the coming of age of Estonian modernists. In a reprise of the ethnocentrist tendency, in press releases Estonian modernists are once again praised as classics, predecessors, and even legends of Estonian art history, but never for what is called ethnosymbolism by Anthony Smith (1988) cultural signification of a nationwide sense of the common body. They are instead acclaimed for going beyond; breaking that imagined outer limit and making it in terms of stylistic canon of European modernism. This priority and respective subject positions, as mentioned above, started to gain ground with the Noor-Eesti group taking over the local mainstream at the beginning of the twentieth century. The reminiscences of this cultural
coup, projected into the past, are visible in present-day press releases regarding Nikolai Triik’s radically modernist reception (see above), this at the cost of complete public denial of his preceding and most prolific ardor for national romanticism, tempered with symptomatic lyro-epic elements. Likewise, many other Estonian artists with similar backgrounds are resolutely re-contextualized nowadays to match Western textbooks of modern art; the following excerpt focuses on pointillism, a sub-current of French impressionism:

An exhibition satiated with clanging colors offers surprises and parallels: the art works of both international painting celebrities (Paul Signac, Henri-Edmond Cross, Maurice Denis, Maximilian Luce, Paul Sérusier, Louis Valtat and Verner Thomé) and domestic painters (Konrad Mägi, Villem Ormisson, Herbert Lukk and Konstantin Süvalo) are on display (AME 2010c).

It is not my aim to question the attributed context. My concern is that they are not provided any others, any other subject positions in press releases. The sole position provided is the exclusive right to legitimize the modernist artists as such. Self-inflicted provincial stigmas came along with this position, apparently. Artists are discursively segregated in this seemingly merry group of free spirits. There is a barely disguised evaluative distinction between ‘international painting celebrities’ and ‘domestic painters’ planted in the press release. This is covered by a manifest declaration of professional equality among artists: ‘All of these artists are infatuated with painting dots, prone to longing for color harmony and tempered picture planes’ (AME 2010c). It is also, however, in my view, a symptom of a broader and more sedimented cultural discourse of a self-promoted sense of inferiority in relation to visiting exhibitions from the imagined West. It is exactly in the subtle trivia of daily grammatical maneuvers that a colonial sense of spatiality and the concomitant power relationship between the celebrity culture of metropolises and their quasi-voluntary peripheries is discursively reaffirmed and socially reproduced. More prominent in another section of the press release, it is presented to the reader as the ultimate definition of the Estonian modernist, who is provided only two options to make it in professional terms: either by ‘following the lead’ (i.e. of Europe) or ‘by creatively interpreting it’ (AME 2010c).

Either way, slipstreaming is elevated to the notion of the cultural mainstream, or so we are assured. Cultural supremacy also has to have high standing and established mouthpieces in the local arts scenes in order to market to audiences the cultural insignias of both greatness and insignificance, not to mention the urgency to override the latter with the former by cultural import. The inaugural speech of the director of AME in 2007 expressed this in welcoming the watercolors of Joan Miró’s old age to the museum: ‘Apart from hosting for the first time in Kumu an artist noted and appreciated in art history, it also testifies to the ability of our new museum to deliver the pearls of European art history to small Estonia’ (AME 2007b).

**Conclusion**

First, some disclaimers: It has not been my intention to provide ultimate definitions. Discursive analysis is not comprised of quantitative measures, nor does it have inductive ambitions. I have not intended to make isolated examples out of the professionals working in visual arts these days, even less of the AME. My inquiries have been limited to stating the problem of possible political bias in the present state of Baltic postcolonial studies and providing an example of their analytical apparatus
engaged otherwise. Even here my initiative ranks at best as a belated addendum to prior analyses of the Western colonial presence in eastern Europe in general and in the Baltic states, still unfortunately outnumbered by research agendas of the Soviet colonial past. The current decade has witnessed the first solid harbingers of the anthologization of this research approach. David Moore’s persistent wide-open comparative stance in methodology is finally doing justice to postcolonial studies of eastern Europe (revisit in this light Kelertas 2006) to the detriment of the Sovietologists’ control of the studies mentioned above. The multitude of European internal colonialisms, or the abundance of distinct colonial rules and layers on the east side of the Iron Curtain, is now conceptualized for a new research area, ‘with an emphasis on differences, clashes and disruptions’ (Annus 2014). This adaptation to variety has unfolded both in temporal and spatial terms. The multitude of colonialisms are outlined now increasingly both as a consecutive order of colonial events in history and as an adjacent coexistence of varying forms of colonialism in a shared space, or what was hitherto perceived as such under the homogenizing umbrella term of either ‘Europe’ (Sandru 2012; Gáfríč and Pucherova 2015) or ‘Soviet Union’ (Annus 20187b; Tlostanova 2017).

A comparative angle is added to the Sovietologist leaning in recent, specific Baltic studies, partly by the authors mentioned above. Baltic states are now conceptualized as European internal other, with not much voice of their own (Kalnačs 2016b; compare to Undusk 2014). The Soviet colonial experience has been accompanied recently by scrutinized retrospective insights into thirteenth century crusades in Livonia and Estonia (Tamm, Kaljundi, and Jensen 2016). It has been also provided ideological links both to the Russian tsarist empire and to Baltic German colonial heritage (Annus 2014; Kaljundi and Plath 2017), and related to both nineteenth and twentieth century modernist nation-building projects (Peiker 2016). The European internal colonialist practices at work today, however, are still rarely addressed in Baltic academia (see Kalnačs 2016a; Kalnačs 2016b; Hanovs 2016), and this is the void my study attempts to fill. In this marginal stream of study, my deliberations are limited to Estonia’s current cultural discourse and touch particularly on the neglected plausibility of its self-colonizing character. Here, with the assumed theoretical premises of Durkheimian cultural anthropology and determinist social constructivism, and by running the risk of reading something into the sampled texts, I still hold to the opinion that for an eye armed with analytical sensitivity to cultural hegemony issues, the following answers to research questions are valid for consideration.

(1) In what temporal and spatial terms is the environment around visual art practices depicted in press releases of the AME?

Here, with deictic gestures operationalized to stand for the grammar of the socially shared and culture-dependent perception of both time and space, the concept of culturescape from cultural geography was implemented. Thereby a study of the outer perimeter and scope of culturally relevant space and time was conducted, based on discursive evidence from press releases of the AME from the years 2006–2016. The study testified to the overwhelming and exclusive Eurocentrist bias in spatial sentiment. Estonian national romanticism, Baltic German romanticism and Estonia’s Modernist heritage in the visual arts are all predicated on the European spatial context, even though the cultural imagery of Europe varies. In national romanticism, Scandinavia and the northern area of continental Europe are invoked in order to
embrace and revive the Enlightenment-driven stigma of borealism in more lyro-epic terms. Both Baltic German and Estonian Modernist cultural discourse manifest an even more candid adaptation to the supremacist geography of European cultural metropolises, this incidentally by allowing the notions of ‘province,’ ‘smallness,’ and ‘slum’ to constitute a part of their own public self-description. With Estonian contemporary artists depicted mostly against the culturescape of the global art world and supposedly to be evaluated strictly in terms of their individual success at different global art biennials and triennials (taking place in West Europe mostly), it may be argued that the current Estonian mainstream culture, or at least its public self-reflective discourse, seems to qualify as the epitome of a typical colonized culture with no (perceived) agency of its own.

As for the temporal axis correlated to cultural discourses discussed above and their associated social values, it is presented tacitly to the reader that as time passes and with evolution and civilization taking their toll, a concomitant rearrangement in value orientations runs from community values to radically individualist and voluntary liberal priorities, as clearly exemplified by the liberal artistic practices of the contemporary art world.

(2) What is the subject position provided for visual artists in press releases of the AME?

Estonian nationality has been wiped out of the Estonian cultural mainstream with the stigma of public enemy on its face: ‘nationalism, so natural and justified at first glance, also causes segregation, discrimination, suffering and violence in Estonia,’ as profiled from within the liberal viewpoint of contemporary arts and cultural globalization (AME 2010b). Given the more circumstantial evidence elaborated prior to this radical judgment, the answer to one of the preliminary questions posed in the introduction seems obvious. Of the options in the debate on national agency in an increasingly liberal global world, the Estonian cultural mainstream contributes through the interdiscursive emergence of the present times and resolutely individualistic value orientations, while demonizing the nationwide sense of community and stratified class societies as anachronisms of the past (for a similar critical stance, see Anderson 1991; Smith 1988; Gellner 2008).

This brings us to the cultural agent. Articulating both national and cultural agency in terms of lack and absence, results in nothing but an unproductive relapse into Marxist theories of social repression. More in the spirit of both social constructivism and poststructuralism, the agents in question are proposed hereby for definition in functionalist Durkheimean terms instead, given the legitimizing function of cross-cultural references in the Estonian cultural mainstream. The point of departure here also lies in the anti-essentialist stance of postcolonial theories, namely in the concept of the colonial subject (Bhabha 1994; also to some extent, the subaltern in Gramsci 1971; Landry and Maclean 1996, Spivak 1999). Likewise, feminist gender studies also theorize on the culturally dis-empowered gender roles of women in a similar vein. Dorothy Smith (1990) attributes this to the conceptual agency of the ‘outsider within,’ reminiscent of the more popular concepts of the subaltern and colonial subject. All of the authors mentioned are quite articulate in profiling certain similar subject positions in culture that seem to match the cultural agency of the current Estonian mainstream, with its immediate geographical neighbors from the Baltics implied. By cutting some disciplinary corners, the conceptual
consistency between feminist, cultural geography and postcolonial studies seems to me sufficient to conceive of the Estonian mainstream cultural agent along their common conceptual guidelines. Hence, notwithstanding the indisputable rhetorical differences between ethnocentrist, Eurocentrist, and globalist culture discourses of the current Estonia, they all invoke the colonial subject as the main agency of culture. It is the one who is constrained to speak up in public from within a particular colonial truth regime and as its protagonist. Its self-identity is openly hybrid and owes its legitimacy to the kaleidoscopic mosaic of stigmas of marginality once imposed by supremacist cultural policy, but now embraced by the cultural agent in positive terms of an urge to position oneself preferably both within an imagined vista of the panoptical center of (masculine) European core cultures and in the ranks of the evolutionist chain of the artistic career, leading from tribal provinces to civilized metropolises with allusions of concurrent time traveling from the past to the present.

There is a chance that the current cultural parlance in Estonia is actually a language of submission, evidenced by some rhetorical figures of speech in it. I will not rush to judge, demonize, or exorcise these in advance. It could be that we are facing a particular genre of cultural survival here, an astute blend of ideological poisons, lending itself piecemeal to many cultural consents, yet creating finally a form of cultural Mithridatism: one drinks a poison to overcome a certain fear, and does it in manageable doses, and for the sake of immunity. Hence, the more one succumbs to self-representation as a rugged Scandinavian, upright Baltic German, or bohemian flâneur from Parisian boulevards, the less one can think, hear or see evil related to Soviet-era traumas. Yet, I am in agreement with the late Piotr Piotrowski, who rocks this lifeboat through his insistent demand to call the mentioned cultural imaginaries more resolutely what they are: Western narratives. That reduces, for a start, their conceptual reach to the limited scope of area studies, the distinct attempt of the Cold War to isolate the global West from the rest of the world by a recurrent emphasis on differences, clashes, and disruptions (as proposed in a comparative vein by Annus 2014). Quite in the manner that Soviet narratives are now objectified, Western narratives should also be administered their own medicine. This comparative change is already underway, however, although with plenty of vacancies on the bandwagon.

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