

*Folk Tradition and Multimedia in Contemporary Estonian Culture*¹

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Abstract. The legends of the *kratt* or the treasure-bearer have existed in lively oral tradition in Estonian culture for a very long time. These myths and legends have traversed from the oral tradition to literary works, visual culture and music. All these texts on the *kratt* exist in the culture as metatexts which create the world of the *kratt*, where different cultural memories and interpretations are intertwined. This means that the *kratt* as a cultural text is also a multimedial text. Different media use different tools and this makes the interpretations more playful and interesting. Andrus Kivirähk's novel *Rehepapp* (*The Old Barny*, 2000) is the central literary work on the *kratt* in contemporary Estonian literature. Kivirähk combines the mythical *kratt* with the figure of Old Barny (*rehepapp*), who is the unofficial leader of the village and a cunning manor house barn-keeper. There are several cultural texts based on Kivirähk's novel, but the most important are the opera *Rehepapp* (2013) by Tauno Aints, libretto by Urmas Lennuk, and the film *November* (2016) by Rainer Sarnet. The 2015 production of the ballet *Kratt* (1943) by Eduard Tubin is more contemporary in its setting and represents everyday life in the modern factory. The article analyses how different multimedial texts about the *kratt* and Old Barny use and combine multimedia to create and convey the social meaning of the *kratt*, and how multimedia use audio-visual poetics to convey a greater number of emotions and aesthetic values in the cultural text. The film by Rainer Sarnet and the ballet by Eduard Tubin represent harmony with different poetics factors and the meanings of the cultural texts.

Keywords: folklore and literature; multimediality; transmediality; identity

Multimediality and Folk Tradition

Multimediality is a concept which connects different media and makes possible the analysis of communication processes in different media: literary or verbal texts, visual media and music. There are several cultural texts (e.g. films, plays

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and paintings) which are based on literature and which demonstrate the relations between different media. At the same time, visual media are dominant in contemporary culture.

Multimediality is an international phenomenon and it contains commercial and business aspects. Visual language and media provide new meanings and connotations to traditional verbal texts in national literatures and cultures: “Here, the key concepts are multimedial text, transmedial text and intermedial text. Textuality, in this case, is based on the idea that communication is impossible without metacommunication.” (Torop 2011: 327–348; 380)

Legends of the *kratt* (goblin)², the treasure bearer, have existed in lively oral tradition in Estonian culture for a very long time. These myths and legends have moved from the oral tradition to literary works, visual culture and music. All of these texts on the *kratt* exist in the culture as metatexts which create the world of the *kratt* where different cultural memories and interpretations are entangled. The *kratt* (goblin) as a cultural text is also a multimedia text: most of the cultural texts on the *kratt* or goblin combine different media (verbal, visual and audio), it means that it is also the transmedial text (see Jenkins 2006: 2–4; Torop 2011: 334). Different media use different tools and this makes the interpretations more playful and interesting.

According to Ülo Valk:

As a belief-related genre, the legend shapes collective mental attitudes and supports the local identities of village communities. Legends express the points of view of those who could be called the rural ‘folk’: the Estonian peasants who were involved in daily communication in face-to-face situations, constantly negotiating relationships between themselves and with others in rural communities where social stratification grew rapidly.

The Estonian legends recorded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries belong to a lively oral tradition. The dominant topics in the legends of this time were the devil, the restless dead, witchcraft, and demons (e.g. *kratt* and *puuk*), who fetch property for their masters by stealing it from local neighbors. Forest and water spirits, ‘underground’ folk, angels and other supernatural creatures also appear in many legends, but these still seem to be more in the background compared with the above-noted sets of beliefs. (Valk 2014: 228)

It is obvious that folklore and myths represented and constructed social reality at the end of the 19th century (see also Valk 2014, Eisen 1995). The word

² The Estonian word *kratt* is not the same as the English *goblin*, although sometimes *kratt* is translated as ‘goblin’. *Kratt* is an untranslatable word, probably a loan from Scandinavian *skratt*.

kratt ('goblin') is an international word: most probably it is a loan from the Scandinavian *skratt* (Eisen 1995: 80). It seems that the most important meanings that these myths and legends convey are connected with social meanings, because these stories about goblins and demons have been very popular also in the 20th and 21st centuries in our culture.

These *kratt* myths moved from the oral tradition to literary works. There are several short stories and novels in Estonian literature dealing with *kratt* and demons. When a folk story moves into literature, the author who writes a work based on folklore interprets the folklore and adds ideology, literary style and a new context. For example, Kreutzwald collected folklore and wrote his famous collection *Eesti rahva ennemuistsed jutud* (Estonian Fairy Tales, 1866), in which some stories contain satire directed against rich people in villages. Kreutzwald interpreted the folklore and created fairy tales which sometimes convey social meanings (Kreutzwald 2006: 446).

According to Ülo Valk:

In contemporary folkloristics legend is usually conceptualised as a believable narrative genre telling about extraordinary events and supernatural encounters. The veracity of legends is achieved through the rhetoric of factualization and verification and by blending the genre with social and physical details of everyday life. [...] Fr. R. Faehlmann and Fr. R. Kreutzwald were among the first authors in Estonia who started a literary project of turning legends into a genre of fiction. During the period of massive folklore collecting in the late 19th century many legends were recorded as utopian reflections of a pre-Christian religion, which contributed to the detachment of the genre from social reality and to turning it into Romantic fantasy. [...] Legends were conceptualized as survivals of the past, as fragments of a larger mythology that had been lost. [...] Today, legend has taken on multiple new forms in literature, media, film, arts esoteric discourse and other contexts. This all has turned legends into an attractive and topical field in international folkloristics with multiple approaches ranging from archival, philological studies to fieldwork-based interviews and analytical research of the Internet and other media. (Valk 2015: 550–555)

So oral myths and literary myths are mixed in national epics which are written texts and which we can read at present. Concerning the Estonian epic *Kalevipoeg*, the folk tales about Kalevipoeg were collected in the early 19th century and then formed the basis of the Estonian epic by Freidrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (cf. Latvian epic *Lāčplēšis*). If we speak of Estonian and Latvian epics, we are actually speaking of literary works which expressed the authors', Kreutzwald's and Pumpurs's, intentions and their time: "a literary work of art, which combines a multitude of folklore elements" (Valk 2002: 408), as well as the

signs of the time when they were written; “Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald composed the epic *Kalevipoeg* in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the romanticism of Herderian ideas were blended by the leading thinkers of Estonia into the ideology of the National Awakening.” (Valk 2002: 407) It means that “Kreutzwald modified folklore sources to compose a work comparable with other European epics, such as Homeric poems and the *Nibelungenlied*” (Valk 2002: 408), and similar to an epic about a great hero, as in the long Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*.

Folk Story in Literature

Eduard Vilde’s character comedy *Pisuhänd* (The Hobgoblin, 1913) metaphorically used the image of the goblin as a trickster and swindler. The main idea of Vilde’s comedy is how it is possible to get rich by swindling people. Vilde combines the business world and bohemians, literature and money, and the thirst for fame at the beginning of the 20th century. *The goblin* is the title of the protagonist Sander’s novel, which he writes because his wife Matilde wants her husband to be famous, a writer who gets rich from his novels. Actually Sander is not talented and he does not write any books, but he borrows his schoolmate Tiit Piibeleht’s manuscript. Jaak Rähesoo has written that *The Hobgoblin* “has remained the best Estonian drawing-room comedy. It has an ingenious plot of a young writer outwitting a businessman in order to marry his daughter; and it has hilariously funny scenes and characters.” (Rähesoo 2003: 42) There are very interesting and colorful characters in Vilde’s play, and it is a very good example of how a motif from folklore works in a literary text.

Andrus Kivirähk’s novel *Old Barny or November* (2000) is the central literary work on the *kratt* in contemporary Estonian literature. Kivirähk combines the mythical *kratt* with the Barny, who is the spiritual leader of a village and a cunning worker in a manorial barn.

Kivirähk is one of the most popular prose writers today. His novel *Old Barny* (*Rehepapp*, 2000) is about Estonians and Estonian identity; it is a self-ironic novel, but it works as a positive grotesque carnival. Kivirähk uses elements of folklore and mythology in his work, deforming them into the absurd and grotesque. The author combines different elements of national mythology, and treats them playfully and freely. There is also postmodernist play, but it is positive and includes tension-relieving laughter, which expresses the positive aspect of the grotesque. It is also significant that Kivirähk has written about some non-specified time when Estonians were controlled by foreign landlords; this historical past is simpler to understand and interpret now, and at the same time people recognize

themselves in some ways. Actually, Kivirähk speaks through national mythology and history about contemporary people in his literary works. (Lindström 2002: 129)

The novel *Old Barny* is written as a diary of the events of one month, November, which is the darkest and most depressing month in Estonia, when the spirits of dead ancestors visit their homes and family members, according to old national myths. The novel is set in the time of serfdom in an Estonian village. The main protagonist of the novel is the old Barny, the spiritual leader of the village. He is a very smart and devious man who teaches other people how to live and how to deceive both the devil and the landlords. Deceit is the main activity among the peasants. Kivirähk uses national folklore and myths in a humorous and ironic manner. He uses irony and the grotesque in representing the life of the village. The grotesque is a phenomenon which connects fantasy and reality, and it is significant how reality gives grotesque meanings to old myths, or at least reality creates an opportunity to read these stories and myths as grotesque texts. These kinds of stories tell us that something is wrong in the present time, that people and nations do not feel comfortable in situations, and that is a grotesque situation which combines tragedy and laughter.

One of the most important mythical figures is the *kratt* (goblin), the treasure bearer who rebukes the old Barny because all people are thieves who steal from the landowners, from each other and even from hell, but do not honor contracts. The wise old Barny tells the *kratt* that the people have nothing to pay him with, except for things they have stolen. He says that their lives are also stolen and that they have to keep on stealing to stay alive; he cannot say what would become of them if they tried to pay honestly for everything (Kronberg 2001: 37–38).

For example, the novel begins with the scene in which the servant Jaan has stomach ache because he has eaten soap in the manor. Old Barny tells the servant that a peasant must limit himself and not to eat everything and too much in the manor. The problem was that the servant thought the soap was an oriental dessert. The moral old Barny cultivates is that stealing is acceptable, but one should not steal too much. Barny's Kratt Joosep tells Barny another example about a family with six children who ate candles in the manor and after that all the family died:

When Old Barny had arrived home, the ancient goblin Joosep offered him warm gruel and asked:

“Well, what was wrong with that farm hand? Nightmares, or what?”

“Oh, what would that cockroach be doing having nightmares?” said Old Barny shrugging his shoulders. “It’s the old, old story – he went over to the

manor and started tasting stuff, and gobbled up something he shouldn't have done. He ate some soap, the daft bugger!"

"Hi-hii!" chuckled the old goblin with his toothless mouth. "People aren't half gormless! I've seen them do a thing or two in my time! One day I went to bring some wheat flour to the manor and there was a family from the neighbouring village. Father, mother and six children. They were all busy eating candles. The father was sitting on a barrel, knife in hand, cutting up wax candles as you would a loaf of bread – a good chunk for each member of his family. Funny, I thought, so I says to them: my dear good Christians, you can't eat candles! Please stop that now, or you'll stop up your bowels! But did they listen to Old Goblin? Did they heck. So I took my flour and went on my way. Later, I heard they'd all died from eating those candles. The Grim Reaper got a good harvest, he did! People just don't have any sense in their heads! As I've always said: don't meddle in things you don't understand! Make yourself a goblin and let him make your mistakes for you. A goblin won't bring no rubbish home! But nobody believes you, people think what goodies the goblin's leaving behind and they go to fetch the goods themselves. (Kivirähk 2002: 26–31; trans. E. Dickens)

There are many situations which combine humour, sarcasm and fantasy in this novel. Kivirähk's grotesque novel uses folklore and myth. He put the old myths into a new context and so the meanings of these old myths change. Old myths were holy texts in ancient societies, Kivirähk demythologizes or even destroys them or it is also possible that he creates a new myth.

It is also possible that the author uses myths to describe present crises. Old myths are narratives or stories which have a great role in the formation of national or cultural identity. At the same time national identity contains several myths or national myths. These are the "stories about who and what we are and where we come from... [...] These myths are embodied by various cultural artefacts, literary texts included" (Lukas 2007: 75). One of the most important things concerning myths is that myths bring together a community or society. Kivirähk uses several motifs of national myths and also folklore in his novel and people recognize these myths as their own stories. It is possible to read that novel just as a funny story because there is already quite a long historical distance between the time when manors existed in Estonia and recent time, and it is possible to read that novel as an implicit warning against a society that accepts stealing and lies. It still seems the readers did not take the novel *Old Barny* as a warning in the year 2000 when the novel was first published because the crises were too far away and there was hope in society. Grotesque situations and grotesque images were just fun.

The grotesque is an old and complicated phenomenon or category that unites things which are seemingly impossible to unite: the comic and the horrible, the real and the fantastic etc. The grotesque as a phenomenon is older than the literary term “grotesque”, and the meaning of the term has changed over centuries. (Kayser 1981; Ploom 1997: 84–85). The Estonian researcher Harald Peep believed that the grotesque connects both fantasy and reality and that is the reason why the grotesque exists in romanticism, realism and other literary styles (Peep 1978: 57). Kivirähk combines different elements of national mythology and treats them playfully and freely. It is possible that there is also postmodernist play present but it is positive and includes relieving laughter which expresses the positive aspect of the grotesque. Estonian readers recognize themselves and laugh at themselves, although the topics are serious too.

The novel *Old Barny* is about Estonians and Estonian identity; it is a self-ironic novel, but at the same time it works as a positive grotesque carnival. Kivirähk uses “elements of folklore and mythology in his work, deforming them into the absurd and grotesque” according to Janika Kronberg (Kronberg 2001: 37). Kivirähk uses a similar method also in his short stories and for example in his play *Eesti matus* (The Estonian Funeral, 2002) where he represents in an ironical manner the everyday life of Estonians where all practical things (food, work and duty) are more important than love and feeling. Actually, Kivirähk speaks through national mythology and history about contemporary people (see Lindström 2002: 132).

Folk Story and Transmediality

There are several cultural texts based on Kivirähk’s novel which work as metatexts in Estonian culture. The most important are the opera *Rehepapp* (*The Old Barny*, 2013) by Tauno Aints, with a libretto by Urmas Lennuk, and the film *November* (2016) by Rainer Sarnet. All these metatexts demonstrate how the cultural text on the *kratt* exists as a transmedial text (more about metatexts see Torop 2011: 334–335 or Torop 1999 27–41).

The opera *Rehepapp* (2013) is based on Kivirähk’s novel and tells the story of Old Barny and his problems when he works as the spiritual leader of the village. He is presented as a lonely man who is caught up in his memories of his love for the witch Minna in his youth. *Kratts* have background roles in the opera, except for the *kratt* (goblin) made into a snowman, the “Demon Made of Snow”, who has been made by the taskmaster Hans. The demon made of snow tells beautiful love stories and Hans is bewitched by the stories told by this wonderful demon. The

demon made of snow looks like a character from a Walt Disney film. The visual effects are presented mainly in a grotesque style. It is a situation comedy and the language of the opera is in low style, although the main idea of the opera is love, or more precisely the lack of love (Kotta 2013). The most important things in the village are deceit and lies. Kivirähk's grotesque is the main aspect that is retained in the opera: there are grotesque *kratts* (e.g. the *kratt* named Joosep jumps with skydivers), and language which connects mythological protagonists and folklore with the contemporary cultural memory and the absurd.

The film *November* (2016) by Rainer Sarnet is also based on Kivirähk's novel, but the grotesque is not the dominant aspect in this work due to the difference in film production. The film *November* is characterized by very beautiful visual poetry: the black and white shots contain charming and mythical light (Varts 2017). A magical and mystic world is created in this film. The critic Aarne Seppel called the film's poetic aspect magic naturalism: the grotesque images and protagonists, presented with visual poetry, create a stylish and charming world of fantasy where the beautiful and ugly are combined (Seppel 2017). The grotesque points to the deformations of the real world, and creates a new world which has a deformed structure.

The film begins with shots of strange and deformed *kratts* (goblins): these demons were created using unusual 21st century materials, and don't seem to belong to ancient times or to the 19th century. The film connects different historical periods with contemporary culture. The grotesque not only deforms the real world (the historical or contemporary world), it also uses (cultural) memory and deforms that memory. The grotesque is a tragic phenomenon and also tries to be comic. This means that the grotesque connects laughter and tears: it is laughter through tears. The most beautiful shots are where the peasants communicate with their ancestors, especially with dead parents.

The protagonist represents the very poor of the village and the characters are sometimes ugly and miserable or even comic. The grotesque does not destroy the beauty of these shots and the visuals and content work together to show ancient Estonian religious animism as something positive and beautiful (see also Kõivupuu 2017).

The ballet *Kratt* (The Goblin, 1943, the most recent production from 2015) by Eduard Tubin is based on folklore, and the librettist was Elfriede Saarik in 1940. The last version of Tubin's ballet premiered in 2015 at the Estonian National Opera; the choreographer and stage director was Marina Kesler. It was a contemporary performance and showed contemporary life in a modern factory, with human vices leading lives of their own. Kesler described the idea of the ballet:

In our version, he might be – a symbol of the Farmer’s greed. Contemporary Goblins could also be people that offer contracts that they cannot guarantee, who print counterfeit money, or hackers who make unfair deals to bring money for their company. [...] The first thing that captivated me was Tubin’s music ... [...] The plot of *The Goblin* is more complicated than that of the classical ballets based on fairy tales and love stories. [...] When Tubin submitted the first and shorter libretto version to the ballet libretto contest held by the Estonia Theatre in 1940, it lacked the love story between the Peasant and the Farmer’s Daughter. He added it later. The fact that the love story is of secondary importance in this ballet can be felt. For me, however, the topic of love is very important in *The Goblin*, as the entire idea and all the values are expressed in the conflict between two worlds: the greedy world of money and the spiritual world of love. (Kesler 2015: 7–9)

The love story between the servant and the master’s daughter is the key element in Kessler’s version of the ballet. It is a classical love story, where the master forbids the servant and his daughter from seeing each other, because the young man is too poor. But the servant sees the master in a money transaction with a goblin. The servant understands that something suspicious is going on in the master’s business. The servant uncovers the goblin’s actions and people start to hassle the goblin. The goblin decides to take his revenge on the master who has failed to protect him. The goblin sets fire to the farm while the master is losing his money gambling at a casino and demands more and more money from the goblin. Finally the goblin, but actually greed, destroys the master. The end of the ballet is classical and familiar from folklore, but the story takes place in the contemporary business world.

The costume designer Gerly Tinn visited the Estonian National Museum, as did Eduard Tubin when he created the ballet:

I went to the Estonian National Museum to read more on the topic. Having a goblin was more than fun and games. At some point, the goblin always turned against his master and then there was no escape for anybody. To get the service of a goblin, you had to have contact with supernatural powers and the master always hoped that, at the decisive moment, he could outwit the devil. Sometimes he succeeded, but oftentimes there were so many catches related to the deal that the person could not handle it anymore. [...] Our stage production also expresses the idea that when a goblin is working for you, you need to be a good master: this is a serious responsibility. [...] Our goblin is more contemporary and not very similar to the mythological creature. He comes from a machine, instead. Maybe from the world of computers. [...] We also know that on 9 March 1944, at the sixth performance of *The Goblin*, the theatre was hit by a bomb and the building burnt down. [...] Boris Blinov, who danced the part of

the goblin that night, ran through the burning streets wearing the costume of the goblin. There is a certain amount of superstition related to the story. (Tinn 2015: 12–13)

Tubin used about thirty pieces of Estonian folk music which he discovered in the museum. These melodies are very well-known and they are also used in Estonian folk dances and national dance festivals. The music, and *The Goblin* as a whole, was too modern at that time for the leaders of the Estonia Theater. So, the world premiere was on 31 March 1943 in the Vanemuine Theatre in Tartu. The ballet was very successful in Tartu and in 1944 *The Goblin* premiered in the Estonia Theater in Tallinn. (Tubin 2015: 68)

Marina Kesler's production is an archetypal story of contemporary times, when business and money are the most important things in human life. The idea is similar to the other literary treatments mentioned above, but translated into the language of dance: the choreography and narrative are very fast. The atmosphere is nervous, because the main idea in this world is effectiveness and success. The choreographer has combined several styles in this ballet: modern dance, classical and neomodern dance. Eduard Tubin also combined different musical styles in this work, although Estonian music had the primary place in his ballet. (Tubin 2000: 214–215)

There are several multimedial or digital effects in the performance: the fire in the second act, machines, a modern factory etc. All of these effects make the performance more international and understandable to different types of people: it is an Estonian story, but it also applies to other nations. (Garancis 2015)

Conclusion

The motives of folklore and legends have taken on multiple new forms in literature, film, art, theatre, media and other contexts in contemporary culture. Multi-mediality is an international phenomenon which makes interaction between different media possible. The most important thing is that the verbal and visual media together put literary texts into new contexts, perhaps into a global context, and make new interpretations possible. Even old legends work successfully today in the global context when they address contemporary issues. This all has turned legends and folklore into an attractive and topical field in international folkloristics and literary studies with multiple approaches ranging from archival, philological studies to analytical research of the Internet and other media. The transmedial text *kratt* demonstrates how the cultural text on *kratt* works in literature as a verbal art, in opera as a combination of text, visual art and music.

All these components are connected in the film *November* and in the ballet *The Goblin*.

Kivirähk uses the grotesque in the novel *Old Barny* and the grotesque and irony together work in the literary text as a warning and they may express in an implicit or even explicit manner critical situations. Myth and humour may connect society. It means that if irony contains humour it can connect society but sarcasm will destroy the cohesion. The grotesque works in a similar manner. All these factors are not static but dynamic, the meanings of irony and grotesque depend on the readers, and how they interpret the texts and also the context. Old myths work successfully in contemporary times in the global context if they convey social meanings and messages to contemporary audiences. Multimediality is an international phenomenon which makes possible interaction between different media and visualizes literature and the folk tradition.

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