



Ethnofuturism

In the spring of 1989, a small group of young writers in Tartu, Estonia founded a new aesthetic movement which they called ‘ethnofuturism’. The name was meant as a provocation to the then already moribund socialist realism. The original group consisted of the poets Kauksi Ülle, Sven Kivisildnik, Valeria Ränik, Karl Martin Sinijärv, and the writer Jüri Ehvest. A few literary critics and scholars also joined the group, which soon organized itself into the Estonian Kostabi Society, named after the American Estonian painter Mark Kalev Kostabi who is widely known through the Internet.

According to the first ethnofuturist manifesto, the main aim of the movement was to blend traditions from folklore and national romanticism with postmodern principles: intertextuality, pastiche and simulacrum, that is, the mixing together of various kinds of literary sources without puristic rigor. Ethnofuturists relied heavily on the Internet as a censorship-free medium. This is understandable, given the Soviet censorship of the period with its powerful Central Authority of Literary Affairs (also called Main Administration for Safeguarding State Secrets in the Press; or Glavlit).²

In Tartu, in 1994, the EK\$ organized the first Finno-Ugric Young Authors’ Conference, where ethnofuturism was presented to writers and artists of related Finno-Ugric peoples. A second conference was held in Izhevsk, Udmurtia in 1998. The third and fourth conferences took place again in Tartu in 1999 and 2001 when ethnofuturism was accepted unanimously as a philosophical system and aesthetic program especially well suited for Uralic (the collective term for the Finno-Ugric and Samoyed language families) literature and arts. Some of these ideas can be found in the text compiled by the leading figures of Estonian ethnofuturism (cf. Päril-Lõhmus & al. 1995: 11-15). (...)

Etymologically, the concept ethnofuturism relates to *ethnos* – to minority peoples and ethnic groups with their own traditions and cultures, whose ethnic and national existence is at stake or threatened by state assimilation policies or multinational enterprises. *Ethnos* experiences pressure from larger peoples, for example Russians or, in the case of the Samis, the Nordic majority peoples in Finland, Sweden and Norway.

Futurism no longer relates to the modernist aesthetic program launched by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in Italy and Vladimir Mayakovsky in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. Here it refers to the development of an ethnic culture based on one’s own language and heredity. The aim of ethnofutur-

ism is not just to save cultural traditions. Above all it seeks to construct a new urban ethnic culture for peoples who have previously been nomads and peasants. The ethnic youths in the villages speak or at least understand their mother tongue and know the principles of their traditions, customs and culture. However, as they move to the cities, they forget their heritage and blend into the majority. Ethnofuturism is a philosophical and artistic “survival program” which guarantees a future to small languages and cultures. (...)

Because ethnofuturism does not rely on rigid rules as classical philosophical systems and aesthetic programs do, it has been defined in different ways. There is an ongoing debate about its scope: is ethnofuturism global and general or should it be restricted to the Finno-Ugric or Uralic world? The young Estonian semiotician Ott Heinapuu, for example, has criticized the author for, on the one hand, defining the term too broadly and thus nebulously, and on the other hand, by restricting it to the culture of Uralic peoples. In his view, one should not speak of ethnofuturism but rather of Uralic philosophy (Heinapuu 2000: 9). True, ethnofuturism germinated and was first disseminated among Uralic peoples, although its principles have to a certain extent become known among the Turkic peoples of Russia as well. The Chuvass literary critic Atner Huzangai, for example, gave a lecture about Chuvass ethnofuturism at the AFUL conference in Udmurtia in 2002. This spread is understandable: the Finno-Ugric and Turkic peoples live side by side, are mixed (especially in Central Russia) and their language systems differ from the Indo-European system. Even though the old theory of the linguistic link between the Uralic and Altaic language groups is no longer considered valid, it is obvious that there are many common traits in the type of thinking based on the languages of these two groups.

Epistemological Principles

In 2001, the well-known Estonian writer and philosopher Jaan Kaplinski gave a paper at the University of Tampere with the title “If Heidegger Had Been a Mordvinian”. According to Kaplinski, the most advanced philosophies have been created in classical Greek, German and Chinese languages, but never in any of the Finno-Ugric languages. Philosophers have spoken about language fairly extensively, but most of the time they have done so with reference to language in general, not with reference to concrete languages like classical Greek, English, Finnish, Hopi or Erzja-Mordvinian. Differences in language structures were considered irrelevant and their impact on philosophical thinking has been examined very little (Kaplinski 2001: 1-3).

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