

# ACTIVATE ONLY WHEN ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY

Utopian Memories in the Documentary Films of Mika Taanila

When you get right down to it, the future is just people laughing together in a room. From Monsanto's House of the Future, opened to the public in Disneyland the same year the Soviet Union launched the first Sputnik, to the carefully regulated data streams of the Microsoft Home, modelled on Bill Gates' own Seattle mansion, that's the image most often projected onto tomorrow, even when we aren't allowed to share in the joke. People laughing together in a room: it represents the most basic design for modern living, holding out to us the prospect of ease and security, coupled with a feeling of weightless belonging in a world of bright promise. It's a narrative fragment, an ephemeral collection of sights and sounds and gestures whose fleeting presence can be detected throughout the work of Finnish filmmaker Mika Taanila.

Whether in the form of a biographical portrait of electronics arts pioneer Erkki Kurenniemi obsessively recording the details of his daily life, an optimistic retracing of the Futuro's elliptical line of development as the mass-produced temporary home of tomorrow or an impassive commentary upon the stumbling encounters between man and machine during the annual RoboCup tournament, Mika Taanila's documentaries strive to make sense of a fragmented inverted logic.

Already anticipating how the pieces might not fit, Samuel Butler spelled the logical breakdown out backwards for nineteenth-century readers of his novel *Erewhon*, a satirical account of an upended social utopia in which machines are banned for fear they might take over the world and the pursuit of knowledge serves absolutely no practical purpose whatsoever.

For those who can't speak the language, Utopia has always been literally 'nowhere', its lack of both physical dimensions and geographical location endowing the place with the greater part of its accumulated mythic power. At the same time, what defines Utopia most accurately is the collective sense of failure that surrounds it; even if the place ever could exist, this particular strand of logic runs, it would have been torn down years ago. After all, what makes Monsanto's House of the Future, with its insulated glass walls, picture telephones, ultrasonic dishwashers and atomic food preservation, so different and appealing is that it was finally demolished after an

estimated 20 million visitors had passed through its precision engineered plastic shell. Similarly, the futuristic Philips Pavilion, designed by Le Corbusier in association with the composer Iannis Xenakis for the 1958 Brussels World Exhibition owes its own immortality to the skilful application of the wrecking ball. Its most enduring relic, however, remains the dynamic patterning and shaping of Edgard Varèse's *Poème Electronique*, the first multi-channel composition for magnetic tape, recorded over a seventh-month period in 1957 at the Philips Research Laboratories in Eindhoven. Utopia is merely a temporary hoarding where such coming attractions are fly posted for the future. The scraps and remnants overlap each other: a forgotten snatch of library music, some frames from a promotional film, laboratory test footage, a moment at a trade fair or a flash of text from a television commercial. When the pieces fit together, we call it progress. When they don't, we rely upon a filmmaker like Mika Taanila to make stories out of them.

### Asleep at the Wheel

Progress, Nietzsche observed in *The Anti-Christ*, is a modern concept and therefore false. Perhaps the greatest falsehood associated with it is the notion that progress can somehow provide the most direct route to Utopia: that there's a straight line linking us to the promise of tomorrow. A complex interlocking of production with consumption, progress is its own reward and as such also demands a history all of its own. Look carefully and you can see that straight line skilfully delineated in the opening moments of Taanila's two films, *Future Is Not What It Used to Be* and *Futuro – A New Stance for Tomorrow*.

Both start with a man at the wheel of an automobile, accompanied by his off-screen musings. Kurenniemi's thoughts are shadowed by a particularly powerful sense of forward motion, with abstract colours streaming at us from a dark background, a camera lens rushing through a stark winter landscape. But it's the image of Kurenniemi steering his car along a broad feeder road into the glistening city that pulls you along. You're intensely aware of the road straight ahead. It's as though Marshall McLuhan, who once famously noted that we catch glimpses of the present in our rear-view mirror as we move forward, were sitting right beside him in the passenger seat.

If the modern motorway system takes us anywhere at all, it's towards tomorrow: so keep your eyes on the highway and your hands upon the wheel.

McLuhan understood the linear properties of progress, many of his analogies involving the dynamics of rapid movement along a direct stretch of open road. We're never far from contemplating the shortest distance between two points. 'That's how I prophesy,' McLuhan would later remark. 'I look around at the effects and say, well, the causes will soon be here.'

What makes his observations so appropriate to a discussion of Mika Taanila's documentary films is that McLuhan was notorious for falling asleep in the cinema. In 1968 he had to be constantly nudged awake during a special advance screening of Stanley Kubrik's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. 'It's nice to have the avant-garde behind you,' he commented afterwards.

Narrative is a linear reconstruction of the facts: documentaries cannot exist without it. As humanity becomes increasingly integrated with its own technology, memory will slowly replace all the other senses – a camera is not an eye, nor should it be regarded as one. Taanila's films capture the harsh clarity of that realization: it's been caught most recently during *Optical Sound* in the play of car headlights across the dark glass expanse of an office block at night. The reflection is automatic, featureless: rapid and unthinking.

And yet we feel completely at home surveying the worlds depicted in Mika Taanila's films. Perhaps that is because they take such a gentle pleasure in documenting the uncompleted endeavour: shapes and applications that have either been superseded by progress or abandoned by circumstance. Matti Suurosen's Futuro housing module stands revealed as an elegant architectural curiosity, the robot soccer teams contesting with each other in *RoboCup 99* are shown happily conspiring towards their own obsolescence, while Erkki Kurenniemi's genius seems to belong to any other age than the current one.

Taanila's films display how unfinished projects set their own terms when it comes to making deals with posterity; they excuse themselves from historical discourse. If Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome created for the 1967 Montreal Expo fails to excite our interest nowadays, that's probably because it is still standing.

Manic Precision

Back in the pioneering days of electronic music, the wild analogue beeping produced by machines made of wires, coils and oscillators could never be anything other than what it was: a promise of what might be, trapped between the limitless possibilities of tomorrow and the technical shortcomings of the past.

As historical accounts of its development over the previous century continue to reveal themselves, the names of some particularly inspired innovators have emerged to claim our attention. It's a long list, but it would be incomplete without the inclusion of such individual talents as Ray Scott, Bruce Haack, Daphne Oram, Delia Derbyshire, Tom Dissevelt and Tod Dockstader. Working with soldered circuits, exposed relays and open reels, they made the future up as they went along. Sometimes it worked: sometimes it didn't. Marcel Duchamp taught that lesson well: useless tools require the most skill.

With *Future Is Not What It Used To Be*, Mika Taanila has added another name to the list. A man who has pursued the parallel paths of technician, scientist, philosopher, composer and artist since the early 1960s, Erkki Kurenniemi has done more than build 'automated instruments' and create scores for them; he has developed means for people to interact with audiovisual programming 'out of the box', as it were.

Alongside such technological marvels as the 'Andromatic' synthesizer, the 'Electric Quartet', a device created to facilitate collective composition, Kurenniemi also formulated the interactive strategies required in the early 1970s for the DIMI-O (Digital Music Instrument, Optical Input), which allowed video signals to trigger electronic sounds, and the DIMI-S, also known as 'The Sexophone', which uses skin conductivity and tactile pressure between players to generate music.

There's something distinctly Utopian about the ways in which Kurenniemi has choreographed physical contact between human beings and machines over the years. 'Another of Kurenniemi's innovations was the Electroencephalo-phone,' Mika Taanila has noted, 'a monophonic instrument that reacted to brain impulses registered by sensors attached to the musician's earlobes.'

The relationship between humans and technology depicted in Taanila's film remains an inherently social one; it comes as no surprise, for example, to discover that over the course of his varied career Kurenniemi went from creating computer music to designing industrial robots.

As an inevitable outcome of the computational principles invoked by Turing's Universal Machine, with its potential to transform all earthly experience into a

sequence of zeros and ones, hardware and software are converging to the point of total dematerialization. The old configurations of data streaming will eventually vanish into one another, leaving the replication of sound and vision as the sole industry standard for communication.

Soon whole personalities may even be reconstituted online.

To Kurenniemi, it seems entirely possible that humanity will eventually be little more than a strand of code, a digitised spark of consciousness floating in space, a bodiless download without shape or form. By then, our machines will be doing all of our living for us. Hardwired into Utopia, finding itself precisely everywhere and nowhere at the same time, the only activity left to the human race will be to remember the details of its collective past.

Kurenniemi is consequently shown obsessively taping and photographing the details of his everyday life down to the price of a cup of coffee, not just against the ruin of some future posterity but to show the inhabitants of that new Utopian space what it meant to be human in the latter years of our earthbound existence. ‘I register everything with manic precision,’ Kurenniemi is heard to comment at one point in *Future Is Not What It Used To Be*: such feverish activity revealing the long-term humility and vaulting intellectual pride of the true visionary.

Such a lack of selectivity has no place in the filmmaker’s art, however. Taanila’s documentaries create coherent narrative trajectories out of remembered moments: found footage, archived moments from the past, recordings that would otherwise have been left to collect dust and corrosion. His work concerns itself with the art of memory rather than the inflexible demands it will make upon the future.

‘Activate only when absolutely necessary,’ is the message that Erkki Kurenniemi would like to have appended to his digitally stored identity, together with all its billions upon billions of memories: because in the end that might be all we have left to us.

## Casa Finlandia

‘Nature ended with Sputnik,’ announced Marshall McLuhan; and, as if to prove his point, Monsanto’s House of the Future opened its doors to the public for the first time in 1957. With panoramic windows that offered breathtaking views of Disneyland’s

candy-coloured spires and ridges, it could also be said to have indicated an extended mythical frontier along which ‘nature’ ended and ‘space’ began.

In *Futuro: A New Stance For Tomorrow*, Taanila conjures up visions of space-age synthetic fabrics, smooth and shiny surfaces, coolly posed vistas of carefree modern living: we see young untroubled people inhabiting with lithe easiness an environment scientifically designed for playboys and fashion models.

By the late 1960s Utopia was nothing more than as a sophisticated fun palace. Viewed today, it is a concept that has all the considerable charm of a failed project.

‘If you ask us, we are often quite pleased with our time,’ Erkki Kurenniemi remarked in 1967, defending the backward complacency of ages past against the demands of progress. Yesterday’s breakthroughs are still happening today.

Or, as Taanila’s films are constantly reminding us, we all inhabit someone else’s future.

Designed by Finnish architect Matti Suuronen, the Futuro house was commercially introduced in 1968, its elliptical shape and evenly spaced oval windows reminding potential customers of nothing so much as a flying saucer, especially when they saw it being lowered into place by helicopter.

Described in paradoxical terms as ‘a realized Utopia’ by Ranti Tjan, Director of Exhibitions at the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, where Suuronen’s prototype is now part of the permanent collection, the Futuro house is historically sited upon a fault line.

Based upon rounded shapes found only in nature, the Futuro was tested against hurricanes and typhoons; a Utopian shape, Taanila’s film reveals, it was also considered suitable for use in disaster areas. Its links to the flying saucer of modern myth align the Futuro with notions of psychological integration and spiritual harmony. ‘A man’s home is his saucer,’ declared one contemporary magazine account of a structure that could only be described in terms of simile and metaphor – which is to say, contrarily. ‘But this is a butterfly,’ states Matti Kuusla, the owner of the first Futuro house of its shape and form, ‘easy to transport.’

The fact that the Futuro was made entirely out of plastic simply clinches the deal. Behind such a metamorphosis lies a socially conceived architecture: a sense of functionality designed to merge both with the landscape and with human need. It’s not only present in the work of Finnish architects Alvar Aalto, Tapio Wirkkala and Kaj Franck, but also in the radical conceptualism of an artist like JO Mallander or in the

studied approach deployed by Ezra Stoller in his photographic studies of Eero Saarinen's TWA terminal at JFK airport in New York.

In the same spirit, Taanila's film does not investigate the brief history of the Futuro and Casa Finlandia, the company formed to market it, so much as inhabit it. As such, *Futuro – A New Stance for Tomorrow* takes place in a world of its own devising, reconstructed from news clippings and newsreels, magazine articles, home movies and snippets of broadcast TV. It is interesting to note how the documentation for the film spills over into other forms: a book edited by Mika Taanila and Marko Home, together with a DVD loaded with a wide range of extras supplemental to the documentary itself and ranging from amateur sci-fi fantasy to a Shinto ceremony, all centred around the Futuro's self-contained ellipsoid curves.

What helps to establish a conceptual framework around this disparate array of material, linking it back to Taanila's film, is the electronic soundtrack specially created for each sequence by Ektoverde. Their music sets up a rich architecture of connections within this complex archive of images, out of which a wider vision is allowed to emerge. Merging with the structure itself, Ektoverde's music becomes part of the data on display, directing the listener's attention instead of merely claiming it, and a new environment comes into existence. Information navigated through time and space becomes second nature to us.

### The Apollo Dream

Intelligence arises out of movement: through interaction with the real world. We can, in the words of Marvin Minsky, the MIT mathematician who pioneered Artificial Intelligence back in the 1950s, 'only get smart things from stupid things'. Mika Taanila's documentary short, *RoboCup 99*, begins with an image from May 1997 of IBM's Deep Blue computer defeating in public contest the reigning human chess champion Gary Kasparov. Deep Blue's triumph seems even more impressive when relayed to us via the synthetic voice chip that supplies the narrative portion of the soundtrack to Taanila's film. Then we recall that Deep Blue was incapable of moving any of the chess pieces by itself, nor could the supercomputer have made its way unassisted to the hall where the actual contest took place.

As the millennium ticks away, and the world awaits the double-digit breakdown that everyone fears will occur when the clocks all hit '00' at midnight, Taanila takes us

through the deciding rounds of RoboCup '99, a soccer tournament in which teams of robots play against each other on a scaled-down pitch in a game of two scaled-down halves. Meanwhile each elimination takes the participants a little nearer to their ultimate goal.

'By year 2050,' declares Hiroaki Kitano, President of the RoboCup Federation, 'a team of fully autonomous robot soccer players shall beat the human World Cup Champion team.'

This projected timescale reflects the six or so decades that separate the Wright Brothers' first powered flight from Neil Armstrong setting his foot upon the moon; what Kitano refers to as the 'Apollo project', as laid out in John F Kennedy's State of the Union Speech in the early 1960s, becomes the blueprint for the accelerated development of artificial intelligence systems over the next fifty years.

It's an aspiration Taanila flips over into pure aesthetics, artificially aging much of the footage of Robocup '99, breaking it up into a corroded play of light and dust particles. After all, as soon as something is filmed, it becomes part of the past. A similar response to the passage of time takes place in *Futuro – A New Stance of Tomorrow*: archive footage suddenly erupts into the flashing of emulsion flaking away, as the roll of film comes to its inevitable end.

Can mechanical images replicate human vision, however? Is the simulation of thought processes the same as actual thinking? And is that electronic voice really speaking to us?

Perhaps not, but it can still tell a story.

All games, whether played against machines or other humans, alone or in teams, are forms of behavioural software. Very few of them were ever designed to run in silence. As Sharif CE Teheran romps home to final victory in the middle-sized robot league, it seems that additional crowd noises have been faded up on the film's soundtrack. But then, what's the point of cheering on, or even shouting encouragement at, entities that can't actually hear you?

The teams of multiple autonomous robots playing in medium-size league are the intermediate precursors of those that will take part in the full-sized humanoid league: the ones that will eventually take on – and beat – a squadron of humans.

'It really looks like a soccer game,' Hiroaki Kitano says admiringly of the way in which the robots' speed of play enhances their credibility as individual entities.

‘By the way,’ says one such entity, wandering through Rodney Brooks’s Mobile Robot Project at MIT, ‘I don’t understand anything I’m saying.’ Minds grow out of dumb bodies, as *RoboCup 99* artfully reveals.

### Towards a Conclusion: Reconstructing the Future

If a machine plays soccer, is it still a machine? Is it still soccer? If a machine plays music, is it still music? Both stand exposed as software. A piano is simply a piece of precision engineering with an elaborate past.

Do machines play music? Is there a difference between a dot matrix printer and a record turntable? *Optical Sound*, Taanila’s 2005 wide-screen interpretation of [The User]’s brutalist sound piece for an array of obsolete printers, depicts the devices ratchetting horizontally together in a stalled symphony, inkjets repeatedly blackening the same area on the page. A digital breakdown of an analogue effect, *Optical Sound* leaves the microphones positioned over each printer carefully in shot, while a cutaway shows animated sound waves tracking vertically down the screen in calm unison. Printers are sold today on the strength of their picture quality. Our office complexes are being transformed into galleries; in *Optical Sound* they become structures of light and movement and colour.

They are also places where data is transferred at the speed of light.

It was computer scientist Ray Tomlinson, responsible for establishing the first electronic mail delivery between two machines back in 1972, who chose the @ sign as part of an email address. He was looking for a character that could not conceivably appear in the computer user’s name. Taanila’s film fills the entire screen with scratchy inscriptions of this sign, which is now rapidly becoming a part of every individual identity.

It’s not the blurring of man with machine that lies at the core of this film, but the blurring of the spaces that each has been traditionally obliged to occupy. We disappear into our data streams, which are everywhere and ‘nowhere’ at the same time.

For *Physical Ring*, the human presence has been relegated to the shadows. In the discarded laboratory footage that is the raw material for this multi-screen installation, a technician can occasionally be observed moving around the edges of some vaguely scientific-looking experiment. He’s little more than a patch of darkness at the edge of

the frame, a random distraction from the undulating circles and spinning radii that take up the main ground. Going in and out of sync not only with itself but also the specially commissioned electronic score by Mika Vainio of Pan Sonic, the indecisive geometry of this now completely meaningless experiment becomes an aesthetic effect.

Disappearing among the leftover ephemera of the experiments conducted within it, the world, as depicted in Taanila's films, is no longer a clear or complete system. It does not have a goal. That's just another falsehood associated with the concept of progress.

Only a machine would think otherwise.

Consciousness, Marvin Minsky has argued, is the memory of inner states. Activate only when absolutely necessary... Living in Utopia is about leaving the past behind without letting go of it. Mika Taanila's films are reconstructed documents from a future that has already been rendered impossible; which is another way of saying that they are true works of art.

Ken Hollings