

Erkki Huhtamo

Kurenniemi, or the Life and Times of a Techno-Visionary

Looking back at Erkki Kurenniemi's career, one easily notices a (seeming) paradox: considering his enormously wide and varied range of activities during the past forty years, the coherence of his worldview seems astonishing. Here is a - partial - list of his credits: nuclear scientist, composer, inventor of electronic music instruments, experimental filmmaker, industrial robotics specialist, computer graphics artist, science exhibition curator, obsessive recorder of his own life. In addition, there are the roles of the brilliant university drop-out and the perennial dissident, both in his thoughts and his actions. The years have left their mark on his face, but his thinking, whether documented in countless tv-appearances or his endless video diaries from the 90s, is immediately recognizable. Talking about almost any topic that inspires him, he is equally lucid: the internal architecture of the computer, electronic music, industrial robotics, the visions of biotechnology, futuristic human-machine interfaces, computer games, the quest of uploading the human consciousness in a micro-chip, the future prospects of living in outer space. Expressed in carefully formulated sentences, Kurenniemi takes his audience from the mundane to the extraordinary in a matter of seconds. In an era when utopias have turned into predictable cliches in popular media, Kurenniemi has retained his skill to surprise.

There is no doubt that Kurenniemi (or "Kurtsi" among friends and colleagues) is one of those rare individuals who have a Vision - an idiosyncratic way of seeing the world and the universe, and assessing the impact of new technologies on the evolution of human beings. Kurenniemi's vision is neither political nor theological. He is not a preacherman aiming to convince others about the truth of his findings, or to mould the world into his own image. Neither is he a businessman, purporting to turn his vision into money. Kurenniemi is a highly original hybrid of a scientist, a humanist and a bohemian who can never feel totally at ease amidst the boring banalities of the bourgeois society. Instead, he is clearly a citizen of the pataphysical Republic of Immodest Ideas. Yet, wild as Kurenniemi's predictions may be, they are never without foundation. Like those of Hans Moravec, they spring from a thorough learning and a scientific mind. Kurenniemi never gets totally carried away by his visions either, using humor and scepticism as a counterbalance. He is ready to admit that although science is mighty, it is not almighty - there are things we simply do not know. Yet, being basically an optimist, Kurenniemi would probably add two more words to the end of the last sentence: Not Yet.

It is not inappropriate to call Kurenniemi a techno-utopian, in the positive sense of the word. For him, science and technology are the powers that will inevitably change life on Earth as we have known it. Yet science is not a quack medicine that will solve global problems like wars and pollution with a sleight-of-hand. Kurenniemi does not offer patent solutions either; he looks further into the future. While doing this, he again and again returns to the frail and imperfect nature of the human being. New prosthetic technologies, like head-mounted retinal displays envisioned by Kurenniemi long before any prototypes existed, function as extensions of the body, yet they fail to solve the key question of being:

human mortality. For Kurenniemi, it is only a matter of time when we will leave our meat bodies behind, having our minds uploaded in super-performing microchips that will grant us immortality. Like other cyber-visionaries such as Stelarc, Kurenniemi finds emotional attachment to the “slimy” human body as purely nostalgic. In the end, the human is just a machine developed by evolution. It is the mind, the consciousness, the emotions that matter, not the rotting meat frame we are forced to live and die in. Even the carnal pleasures of sex, a passion for the humankind for billions of years, will probably be abandoned, replaced by something else.

Kurenniemi’s “doctrine for survival” provides an explanation for his storage and documentation mania. For years, he has been frantically videotaping, photographing, and audio-recording his everyday life, from the special to the banal, from the private to the public. Besides, he has been systematically storing documents and ephemera from movie tickets to supermarket bills and e-mail messages. This constantly growing “databody”, it seems, is a necessary preparation stage for immortality. A life turned into a multimedia database is the first step. Uploading it onto a computer is the second. With the aid of an appropriate artificial intelligence algorithm, yet to be invented, Kurenniemi hopes he will be resurrected as a virtual clone some time in the future, after his meat body has turned into dust in its grave. Turned immortal, as he has remarked with slightly sarcastic humour, there will be enough time to review the memories of one’s former life, even day by day. For what else is there to do? In case this resurrection would not happen within the next half a century, Kurenniemi has devised an alternative, no doubt more practical, scenario: there will a massive re-run of his life as a networked multimedia show on July 10, 2048, his 107th anniversary.

Kurenniemi’s plan for transforming himself into a sentient multimedia database is not just a figment of an eccentric imagination. It is logically derived from the evolution of digital computing that Kurenniemi knows inside out. Indeed, Ted Nelson, another brilliant college drop-out and self-made visionary, is clearly a kindred spirit. Like Nelson, Kurenniemi has tried his hand both in art and in practical applications, restlessly moving from one idea (and institution) to another. Both have created careers that consist of brilliant fragments rather than of finished “masterworks”. But while Nelson has made sure that his main claim to fame, hypertext, is firmly attached to his name, Kurenniemi’s most interesting achievements have fallen into oblivion. He has altogether 14 experimental short films (all left “nearly finished” during the 1960s) and computer graphics to his credit, and his musical output – electronic recordings and theories about mathematical foundations of harmonies - is still waiting to be internationally discovered. Among his most remarkable achievements are the interactive music instruments he designed and built in the early 1970s. They deserve attention, for it is now becoming evident that Kurenniemi’s creations, like the “video-organ” Dimi-O (1971), anticipated interactive installation and performance art by years. Dimi-O uses a videocamera attached to a computerized organ as an input device. A dancer can thus create an interactive soundscape by the movements of her body. This system anticipated David Rokeby’s famous Very Nervous System by more than a decade. Another device called Dimi-S (Sexophone, 1972) allowed participants, chained together by handcuffs, create music by petting each other’s skin. With Nam June Paik’s Opera Sextronique (1966??), Sexophone could be considered one of the original cybersex experiences.

Like yet another hard-to-classify pioneer, Myron Krueger, Kurenniemi understood early on (to quote Krueger) that “the encounter between human and machine” was “the central drama of our life”. Learning to cope with machines, teaching them to be smarter, engaging in increasingly intimate interactions with them, perhaps eventually becoming subsumed into them - these are some of the questions that have occupied Kurenniemi, and quite a few other pioneers, throughout his entire career.

Whether he has found any lasting solutions to these issues is in the end less important than having raised them. Although his predictions may at times seem too wild to be true, Kurenniemi has at least stimulated the technological imagination and helped others to think differently (also in his role as a celebrated science exhibition organizer at Heureka Science Centre in Finland). The development of new technology should not be left in the hands of hardcore technocrats and businessmen only. Artists and idiosyncratic techno-thinkers (and tinkerers) like Kurenniemi have an important contribution to make: pointing out that “things technological” are never quite as prosaic, predictable and one-dimensional as they may seem.

© Erkki Huhtamo 2003

Erkki Huhtamo is Associate Professor of Media History and Theory at The University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), Dept. of Design | Media Arts