

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

(*Telakoe and Voima*), metallic waste (*Rajatila*), dry clicks (*A-kemia and Jobto 1*), soft drones (*Havainto*), moments that border on silence (*Etäisyys*), and sharp sine-waves (*Aleneva*).

The following album, *Aaltopiiri* (2000), is as rich as its predecessor, and sounds like a summa of Pan sonic's discourse and a possible springboard for researches to come. Elegant rhythms, (*Vaihtovirta*), contorted sound threads, dub beats (*Johdin*), heavy, distorted beats (*Äänipää*), dadaesque bends

in the sound (*Uloittuvuus*), melodic tensions, clicks (*Reuna-Alue*), subtle lines that frame silence from which a harsher sound emerges (*Valli*), monolithic rhythms (*Kone and Murskaus*), restless, suffocated textures (*Jobto 3*), and finally *Kiertö*, which teases in its irresistible progression that gets under your skin and mercilessly compels you to move.

In their latest productions, Pan sonic have been breaking the boundaries of music-making, expanding into other contexts, such as the visual and performative arts. They also make in fact sound installations,

which have been hosted by a number of remarkable exhibitions worldwide, notably *Unfinished History*, curated by **Francesco Bonami** at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1998 and *Sonic Boom*, curated by **David Toop** at the Hayward Gallery in 2000. The performative edge of their concerts also made them the vital centre of the *Rude Mechanics* event (hosted by the Beaconsfield Gallery in South London and curated by **David Crawford** and **Hayley Newman** in 1996), where they locked themselves into the gallery building, producing sounds with which a number of other musicians (**Jimi Tenor**, **Bruce Gilbert**,

**Scanner** among others) were invited to interact. Gradually Pan sonic seem to have got closer and closer to the idea of "sound everywhere" implied in the meaning of their original name, "panasonic": a total, pervading sound that inhabits and infiltrates the space and the listening experience.

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## Mika Taanila – Historian of the Future

by Michael Renov

It is not at all unusual to find a documentary filmmaker fascinated with the past. Indeed, the use of film to undertake historical inquiry via the examination of past events, the interrogation of documents, and the recounting of memory through interviews has been one of the most familiar paths pursued during a century of nonfiction filmmaking. The work of Mika Taanila offers something a bit different. In an impressive body of work produced over a brief five-year period (1997–2002), Taanila has turned a finely tuned ear toward the future.

But his is not a future blind to the past. In *Futuro – A New Stance for Tomorrow* (1998), Taanila returns us to 1968 and the creation of the Futuro house, the all-plastic, pod-like home of tomorrow designed by Finnish architect **Matti Suuronen**. Marketed as the next big thing in space-age home design for the leisured classes, Futuro turned heads all around the world in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But, like many other mass-marketed, pop icons of the era, the house of the future became a thing of the past, another exemplar of late 20th-century disposable culture. During the mid-1970s oil crisis, the all-plastic house fell out of synch with the global economy. With sky-rocketing gas prices, how appealing could it have been to live inside a petroleum product? A Futuro enthusiast is heard to say in the film "These units are timeless," but, at a remove of several decades, we are more likely to see them as markedly time-bound. Based on "pure mathematics," "light as a spider," the Futuro house

rode the wave of Space Age utopianism until it crashed on the shoals of global economic contraction.

Yet Taanila is remarkably sympathetic to these 60's futurists despite a generational remove. (Taanila was born in 1965.) Others might have focused on the shortsightedness or opportunism of these investors and salesmen or made them the butt of an extended joke. But there is an ethos underlying the Futuro project that appeals to Taanila, a question that this film raises that recurs throughout his documentary oeuvre. It has something to do with *questing*, with ransacking the present for clues to solving the riddle of the future. Yes, the Futuro crew was fixated on creating and cashing in on the next big thing; their folly is the stuff of the human comedy. But they were also selling a dream of the future at a time when countless new possibilities were

being glimpsed, a dream based on a heady brew of science and art. That dream, the image of a future that seamlessly blends art and science, technology and creativity, recurs in all of Mika Taanila's films, linking them indissolubly.

The clearest statement of the dream occurs in *RoboCup99* (1999) which profiles a relatively small but dedicated culture of computer engineers and artificial-intelligence researchers who annually test their robotic soccer players against one another in a simulation of the World Cup competition. Judging from the many nations represented at RoboCup99 in Stockholm, it is a truly global movement linked by yet another big dream. In a duplication of the triumph of the chess-playing Deep Blue computer over Grand Master **Garry Kasparov**, these researchers' master plan is the defeat of the FIFA World Cup champion by the

year 2050, the victory of the artificially intelligent machine over man.

Once again, there is ambivalence in the portrayal of these New Age warriors. As in *Futuro*, the foibles of the researchers are shown. Deprived of sleep due to their marathon tinkering with their multiple autonomous creatures, the scientists are shown nodding off while clutching the robots like so many teddy bears. The post-victory celebrations from these world-class scientists – the cheers, the prancing, the arms raised heavenward – seem slightly ludicrous as do Taanila's slo-mo instant replays that show the winning shots rolling ever so slowly across the opponent's goal line. But Taanila refrains from the easy laugh. One senses his genuine admiration for these men and women so serious about their games. "This is a field of multiple robots pioneering one day a society of robots among us," says a Carnegie Mellon researcher. It is this pioneering spirit, eyes on the future despite the occasional pratfall, that remains the *idée fixe* of Taanila's oeuvre.

One senses the obsession with future-dreaming even in Taanila's *Thank You for the Music – A Film About Muzak* (1997), another exercise in authorial ambivalence. What easier target for the hipster documentarist than Muzak, that easy-listening musical format that anaesthetizes and seduces its audience. Engineered to facilitate leisurely consumerism or to calm the anxieties of dental patients, Muzak would seem to offer scant basis for the filmmaker's identification. Yet Taanila once again shows us the complexity of a cultural phenomenon. According to one apologist, Muzak "massages the mind" and is "a purified form of music, the way an air conditioner cleans the air"; offspring of early liturgical music according to one interview



Mika Taanila, *Thank You for The Music*, 1997, 16/35mm, colour, 22'51. Courtesy by Kinotar Oy.

subject, Muzak is "religious music for a civilization which has more sophisticated notions of what God is." Yet other voices are heard. One critic reminds us that Muzak is the offspring of Taylorism, the science of human productivity which values profit above all. It is the Valium of the workplace.

In the film, surveillance footage – industrial and unblinking – provides a consistent visual motif, one which matches the lobotomized, 80 beats-per-minute serenity of the music. As elsewhere in his work, Taanila bathes the screen in an unearthly palette of neon hues (hot pink, yellow, electric blue), framing his interview subjects in ethereal, nonobjective settings which cut them off from everyday life. We are forced to enter into a perfectly rarefied environment of a sort consistent with the audio. In Taanila's hands, Muzak becomes the acoustic battleground of the future.

In his latest and most ambitious film, *The Future is Not What It Used To Be* (2002), Taanila discovers the ideal personification for his recurrent themes. Erkki Kurenniemi – computer scientist, builder of electronic musical instruments, composer, and futurist visionary – is the subject of a piece that is balanced between biography and essay film. Kurenniemi's life crystallizes many of the themes discussed in Taanila's previous films: he is the offspring of a scientist and an artist who came of age during the 1960s; he created a business to capitalize on his visions which ultimately failed; most of all, he is obsessed with the future. The film is a remarkable ensemble of audio-visual elements, all of which profile the film's subject while producing a disquieting excess that is the stuff of the essayistic.

Kurenniemi is no simple subject; he is, quite literally, a moving target. He is first imaged behind the wheel of an ancient Volvo, driving through the darkened roadways of Helsinki. Taanila shows us Kurenniemi, allows us to listen to him in voice-over but avoids on-camera interviews. The profile is far too oblique for the frontal approach. The real narration of the life occurs through the gradual exposure to Kurenniemi's ideas and to a succession of his projects. Through a collage of archival footage, vintage film excerpts, and current reportage, we are shown the man at every stage of his adult life. But it is the ideas that reveal him to us. He is unmistakably brilliant, mercurial, a free spirit with an unsettling vision of the future, a man now wholly withdrawn from social life.

His life and work are an alchemy of art and science; his credo is memorable: "Technology won't take control as long as man can misuse it." That maxim accounts for Kurenniemi's self-exile from academe. There are the notable contradictions. The hippy sensibility that once informed the creation of many of his electronic devices – among them, the machine that transforms the touch of fleshy bodies into sound – is at odds with his current self-removal from the world. He speaks of his "manic registration," the 100 digital photographs per day that document his movements through the world, accompanied by a running taped commentary. One day, according to Kurenniemi, the world may wish to reconstruct life in the early 21st century. These documents, meticulously preserved and



Mika Taanila, *Futuro*, 1998, 35mm, colour/BW, 29'. Courtesy of Kinotar Oy.



Mika Taanila, *Robocup99*, super 16mm/super 8mm/DV/Digital Betacam, colour/BW, 25'. Courtesy of Kinotar Oy.

catalogued, shards of his "virtual persona," will allow for a recreation, indeed a resuscitation of a life lived. "Man can be simulated with adequate precision," says Kurenniemi. But it is an apparently joyless act and Taanila knows it. The final instructions for the eventual resurrection offer evidence of Kurenniemi's terminal fatigue: "Activate only when absolutely necessary." Neither Kurenniemi nor Taanila can be accused of blithe utopianism in their vision of the future; the brave new world comes at great cost.

Finally, a word on style. Taanila is an understated formalist whose visual style could be termed 'para-realism.' His films glow with an unearthly light; his interview subjects are more likely to be framed against blue screen versions of actual locations than the real thing. In collaboration with crack cinematographer Jussi Eerola, the films are shot with cool precision. Taanila possesses a refined acoustic sensibility. The occasional sound effect, such as the tinkling of ice in glasses, can evoke an entire world (in this instance from *Futuro*, it is the world of carefree cocktail parties). But don't let the understatement fool you. These are stylish, carefully crafted films that ponder a consistent set of ideas about the visioning of the future and the simulation of reality that may be the keystone of that vision. Could it be that Taanila's films, in the singularity of their look and sonic texture, offer yet another glimpse of the future – this time, the future of documentary film?

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