

A room with a view: *Futuro: A New Stance for Tomorrow*

Picture-Perfect Future

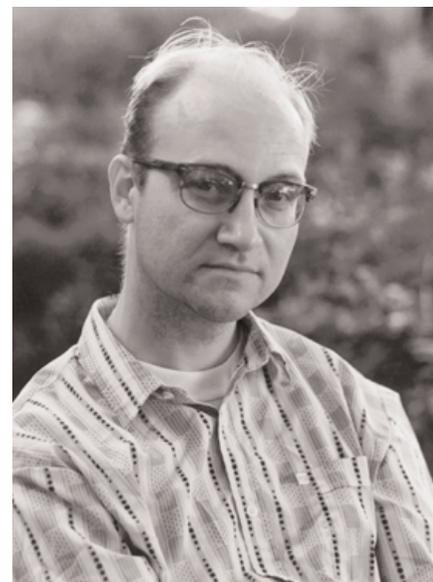
Relics and artifacts from futures both past and possible are the stuff of which Mika Taanila's oeuvre is made. Taanila is a creature of our in-between times, which makes his work hard to classify. Though currently more appreciated in the art and electronic music worlds, he's first and foremost a filmmaker.

Taanila's films are hybrids of the first order, which may be why film culture has trouble with them—no single genre covers what he does. Combining documentary and experimental forms with a speculative fiction sensibility, they're wickedly wise and genuinely weird. His latest, *Optical Sound*, is at once a concise (six minutes long) and expansive (shot in cinemascope) exploration-documentation of the *Symphony for 12 Dot Matrix Printers* by the Canadian group The User, featuring the chattering of the now-archaic machines. Some might call it a structuralist experiment for techno-hipsters or a materialist music video: one thing's for certain—it's some kind of masterpiece.

This encounter with far-out music played on obsolete technology calls to mind the title of Taanila's best-known film, *The Future Is Not What It Used to Be* (02), an homage to Erkki Kurenniemi, the Finnish electronic-arts pioneer, composer, instrument inventor, filmmaker, nuclear scientist, industrial robotics specialist, and computer graphics designer. If you stare at it for long enough, the past begins to look like science fiction, as demonstrated by Taanila's exquisite multiscreen film installation *A Physical Ring* (02), which is constructed from footage of an unidentified scientific experiment from the Forties whose purpose has long since been forgotten. There's just an image of a spinning ring—made present (and soon-to-be-future-past) by an echt second-millennium-adventist electronic soundtrack, suddenly signifying that greatest of historical ironies: What comes around goes around.

The contradictory widening and contracting circle, in a way, encapsulates the Taanila principle: one way or another, everything returns. He is a recycling artist, a reconsiderer of images and sounds who's constantly remixing the tenses. In this context, found footage suddenly seems a bit misguidedly romantic—it implies a linear progression rather than an erratic stumbling toward the sun; put more simply, Taanila is more concerned with creating lost or missed contexts than with the raw materials, although digging stuff up is an essential part of his art.

Therefore, it always feels dead wrong when Taanila, for presentation purposes, divides his work up into films—his 35mm productions (all financed by Kino-tar), music videos (mainly for 22 Pistepirkko and Circle), and other work, which subsumes everything from his early documentaries to the video background projections for the experimental theater group Maus & Orlovski (of which he is a member) to a 16mm live triptych for three projectors commissioned in 1998 in his hometown of Helsinki. In reality they are best taken as a whole, with, for example, a music video forming the basis of a documentary that leads to the publication of a book accompanied by a DVD that contains bonus materials, among which can be found a few “throwaways,” pieces too small to qualify as stand-alone works.



To the Finland Station: Mika Taanila

While we're at it, let's consider the case of *Futuro: A New Stance for Tomorrow* (98), Taanila's homage to the Futuro House, an internationally celebrated piece of hip authentic Finnish progressiveness: a house built of plastic that looks like a flying saucer—even if its developers at Polykem maintain that they used that particular shape for thermal reasons and not as a design statement. The original Futuro was commissioned as a ski lodge, i.e. a house that could be heated rapidly. In short, it was physics responding to the zeitgeist. In many ways, the Futuro story contains the entire history of that vain, hope-inebriated, and hubris-prone period from the mid-Sixties to the mid-Seventies, from the swinging prosperity of the high-industrial age, with its vision of colonizing outer space, to the oil crisis crash landing that made the idea of a plastic house seem criminally insane. *Futuro* evolved out of the music video “Needle’s Eye” (96), which Taanila made with Marko Home for the title track of an album by The Cybermen.

Fascinated by the images they found after *Futuro*'s creator and architect, Matti Suuronen, donated his materials to the Museum of Finnish Architecture, they started researching the house's history only to find that they were also taking a kind of journey back into their childhoods. During their investigations they unearthed material from all over the world in many different contexts: Super-8 film of a Shinto ceremony celebrating the first Futuro house in Japan; footage shot by space-crazy German pop artist and Futuro owner Charles Wilp, who used his “gravity-free social space” for an Afri Cola commercial; a photostory called “The Goddesses of Galaxia,” from an issue of the legendary Swedish porno publication *Private*, featuring hot blonde chicks in black leather doing the nasty inside a Futuro (once *Playboy* declared it “the bachelor’s pad of choice” it was only a matter of time...). As a service to history, Taanila and Home also shot new material on Super 8, which, when viewed alongside the older footage, feels both eerie and melancholic. Some of this is included as bonus material on the *Futuro* DVD, with a score by the Pori-based experimental

improv collective Ektroverde. *The Future Is Not What It Used to Be* expands in a similar fashion into the excellent DVD *The Dawn of DIMI*, which, besides Taanila's film, contains Kurenneimi's unfinished shorts in both their original state and as edited by Taanila to Kurenneimi compositions; buried treasures like *DIMI-Ballet* (71), an improvised performance by Kurenneimi and Riitta Vainio shot for TV but never broadcast; and a concert documentary featuring Pan Sonic playing Kurenneimi compositions on instruments invented or built by the man himself (with live background projections by Taanila).

acceptability or represent visions and ideals that have fallen by the wayside, or both. Taanila loves his protagonists even if he doesn't necessarily embrace what they do—for a start, does he truly love Muzak, the subject of his first major film, *Thank You for the Music: A Film About Muzak* (97)? But then again, how could he deny his own relationship to this particular form of social engineering? Who knows what Muzak might develop into? In Taanila's realm, a state in the paraphysical Republic of Immodest Ideas, the strangest things tend to happen.



Strangeways here we come: *The Future Is Not What It Used to Be*

The house of the future excavated from yesterday: that nicely frames the type of paradox Taanila is always chasing after—with time and design lovingly interrogating and destabilizing each other. To give his interviews with the Futuro pioneers an additional spin, for example, Taanila shot them against a studio's naked “timelessness,” using different Sixties-style 3-D psychedelic backgrounds for colorful, ironic effect. And in his soccer film, *RoboCup99* (99), he puts things into arch perspective via the (often abused) strategy of artificially aging footage—b&w, scratches, etc.—of something that's clearly contemporary.

All these countermoves serve as protective measures. It would be easy to dismiss those who appear in Taanila films, because they're all in one way or another off the straight-and-narrow of historical

Take the RoboCup: in 1999, Italy beat Germany in a soccer semi-final penalty shoot-out—an unlikely event at the best of times but perfectly possible in a reality in which the world champion that year hailed from, of all places, Iran. The spectacle of grown men shouting hysterically at the top of their lungs in support of robots that resemble shoe boxes or dogs chasing a ball slowly over the goal line is truly bizarre. Taanila cuts in footage of Sixties soccer god Pelé to sow the seeds of doubt—the Brazilian's grace, cunning, and intelligence serve as a reminder of how far a robot team will have to go before it can face a human squad (while Pelé fades into memory...), not to mention a Russian scientist's daunting comments about the military possibilities of robot technology. For the future is now, with all the potential and power that goes with it. □