Temporal Shifts

Conversation with Mika Taanila
Kelly Shindler

Kelly Shindler — In your recent film installations, *The Most Electrified Town in Finland* (2012) and *Six Day Run* (2013), I am struck by their emphasis on the present. There is an immediacy to these works, with the action unfolding in real time, that stands in marked contrast to your earlier films and installations, which were almost systematically about retrospection and revisiting people, experiments, and inventions from decades past. Can you talk about this temporal shift and your experience working with subjects whose history is not yet written?

Mika Taanila — Yes, I have noticed the little shift here as well; I do not know where it stems from. The basic question of time is constantly present in cinema. I am still fascinated by the notion of history in the present and future tenses alike. In both pieces, the documentary aspect is important to me in the sense that the films reflect real events and real locations. They are based on facts but use cinematic audiovisual means to communicate something.

Nuclear power as a means of producing electricity is a rather old notion, if you think of the rapid technological innovations of our time. In a way, it is a relic of the past that is nearly 60 years old. But it is perhaps still a good choice in many ways; uranium is not yet an out-dated element and financially it appears to remain very lucrative.

History is still always present in my work, however. Jussi Eerola and I started to make a feature documentary on the construction of Olkiluoto 3 back in 2004. That film is still in progress due to huge delays on the site, but aspects of time and history will be more evident. For example, it will incorporate fascinating Russian and American archival footage from the dawn of nuclear era. And the ongoing construction delays perhaps play a part as well, for they mark the passage of time.

In *The Most Electrified Town in Finland*, the flashing back or forward in time is perhaps not so obvious or literal. But there are two important passages featuring black-and-white film footage. We in fact shot this as 16mm color film and Jussi processed it by hand in his bathroom. Therefore the dirt, scratches, and the actual marks of time were all preserved in the final footage. No digital processing whatsoever! In some respects, these resulting passages suggestively take us back many decades to rural life before the invention of electricity. On the other hand, they can also propose a jump forward into a radiated future in which there are no more humans.

In *Six Day Run*, the time layers are even subtler, I think. Everything you see takes place during those six days in April 2012. The loop of the meditative runners is timeless, in a way. However, the race itself has an interesting history, dating back to the 1870s when it was part of a practice of competitive walking called “pedestrianism.” Money and gambling were involved, unlike in today’s races. The six-day format has remained, but now it is a non-commercial event organized and practiced by few devoted enthusiasts. I wanted to keep the film very simple and not delve too much into the details of the race’s history or the protagonist Ashprihanal Aalto’s private life, for example. I wanted to focus on the sheer experience of running with minimal sleep – running against time. I was also intrigued by Ashprihanal’s

meditative aspect, his desire to rid himself of the burdens of daily life, and therefore wanted the viewer to be able to perceive this altered state of mind, which is almost like a human machine. The fact that the racetrack is situated next to the site of the 1964-65 World's Fair, with the Unisphere lurking in the background, adds an extra futuristic twist. As a result, the timeframe of Six Day Run feels archetypal. It could be set in the dawn of "pedestrianism" or else it could be sometime in the future, in a better, more spiritual world. The use of grainy Super-8mm film stock was one way to emphasize this otherworldly timelessness.

KS — This "otherworldliness" seems to function on two implicitly contra-dictory registers. Many of your settings and subjects feel, as you say, "timeless" – archetypal, even. They could exist anywhere or at any time. On the other hand, they are clearly artifacts from a specific earlier moment – the power plant arising out of the drive toward industrialization that has existed since the late nineteenth century, or this marathon that began in the 1870s and presently takes place on the grounds of America's World's Fair, which is itself an outdated monument to progress. We also witness your treatment of the artifact in your found footage works, like *Twilight* (2010) and *A Physical Ring* (2002), in which you reconfigure vintage scientific footage into multimedia installations. All of these works conjure up earlier moments that most of us did not experience first-hand, yet nonetheless remain grounded in the real, almost insistently so. How does the strategy of documentary come into play in these considerations of time and history?

MT — It is very important that the works are based on facts. This is at the essence of my practice and gives the whole process extra meaning. However, I do not believe in objectivity in documentary filmmaking at all, not to mention in art in general.

The fact that something has really happened – or is happening right now in front of one's eyes in the real world – is very inspiring. With the scientific found footage works, the idea of play is simple: I look for material that has a mysterious or otherworldly quality upon first encountering it. Yet even "looking" is not quite an accurate verb, for one is bound to bump into this material if one is alert. Then I try to trace the facts: who made this footage? When did it all take place? For what purpose was it shot? Who financed it at the time and what were the socio-political implications? And so on.

When making a piece, these historical facts are important to give shape to the final form. With The Zone of Total Eclipse, I had the images and sounds for well over two years before I discovered the right way to present the piece. It may sound simple, but one needs to spend time with the material before it opens up. With A Physical Ring, I tried to deter-mine with the Finnish Film Archive what this anonymously donated material was. There was a 35mm film canister with only a handwritten note that read, "FYSIKAALINEN RENGAS, 40-LUKU" (translates in English to "a physical ring, the 1940s)." When showing this silent footage to various scientists and specialists, we heard fascinating stories and speculations regarding what it was really about. But every time it was a different story! The scientists who conducted the experiment were most likely no longer around to explain it to us. On the other hand, we could not even determine the exact lab or institution where the footage was originally shot. At some point, we stopped asking around. I kind of liked the unsolved story here. The look of the footage appears heavily dated, so I wanted to contrast that starkly by asking Ø (Mika Vainio) to provide a futuristic music score for it.

With the more traditionally conceived documentary works, facts are even more important. We are there

to produce the material – we are in the middle of it all and therefore cannot escape reality. And I do not want to! In my case, the departure from realism perhaps takes place more in the editing phase. I edit all my works myself in my dirty basement studio. I am bound to simplify things or over-emphasize dramatic details, but the facts are still crucial. I would not incorporate false facts if I knew there was the possibility of doing so. With *Futuro – A New Stance for Tomorrow*, it was tricky because there were so many false rumors, gossip, and mis-remembering around the saucer-shaped house. That house clearly triggers many people's imagination. It was lot of fun doing the research with Marko Home and very rewarding to lay down the facts as precisely as possible. But it is integral to see the difference between facts and opinions and feelings. If somebody is speculating wildly in my films, it is him or her speaking, not me. It is his or her own understanding of the truth, so to speak. After the shooting, however, of course my manipulation of the footage and ethics of what I allow him or her to say are reflected in the final piece.

KS — Over the past ten years, you've been creating gallery installations alongside your cinematic documentaries and videos. *The Most Electrified Town in Finland* is a prime example of this, existing as both a three-channel looping video installation as well as a long-form documentary. How did you make the transition into creating works for the gallery and how do you negotiate these different ways of working in your practice?

MT — My background is in cinema. I was a film buff between the ages of 16 and 23, after which I was finally accepted into a film school in Lahti, Finland. I loved avant-garde and experimental films, but they were not easy to see in Finland. At the same time, while dreaming about making films of my own, I spent two years at The University of Helsinki studying cultural anthropology. One of my professors, the late Heimo Lappalainen, screened wonderful 16mm film prints, which he described as "visual anthropology." There were films by Jean Rouch, Richard Leacock, Georges Rouquier, Dennis O'Rourke, and many others. When commencing my film studies, I decided to combine these two passions: the more abstract adventurous experimental work with rigidly subjective observational cinema. Then the gallery path for me started in late 1999 when *Futuro – A New Stance for Tomorrow* was invited to take part in *Day of The Donkey Day*, an exhibition organized around the theme of failure at Transmission Gallery in Glasgow. Little by little, more of my films were invited into various group shows. But it was only in 2002 with A Physical Ring that I started to think about space, duration, and form in a different way. That opened up a new world and a lot of questions regarding random sync, open endings, visitors' attention span, daylight pouring in, the sound leaking into other rooms, and so on. I have learned a little bit now, but the process is slow and still ongoing. I love both worlds, but in different ways.

KS — Let's talk about sound. Through-out your work, you have often collaborated with various musicians and sound artists to produce the soundtracks for your films and installations, you have also directed over twenty music videos to date, and you occasionally dj. In addition, tapes by Musiikkivyöry, your own personal punk project from the early 1980s, were reissued a few years ago. Can you talk about your relationship to sound and how it is manifest across your work?

MT — Music was my first love. I was very young when the punk rock movement started. It was the trigger for me for basically everything. I can still vividly recall the buzz I got from hearing X-Ray Spex, Sex Pistols, or Siouxie & The Banshees on the radio for the first time when I was 12 or 13 years old. There was not much rock music on Finnish radio in those days, usually about one hour per day on one

channel. Those dear minutes were very focused and spent recording good tracks – on cassettes, of course. So for me, listening to music on the radio was the introduction to another way of looking at the world and to creativity in general. In my family, art was not discussed; my father was a geologist and mother a pharmacist. A bit later, I was in a six-piece band called Swissair and then, I recorded as Musiikkivyöry on my own. With my schoolmate Anton Nikkilä, I ran a cassette label called Valtavat Ihmesilmälasit Records from 1980 to 1982. Only after that did I discover cinema in screenings at the Finnish Film Archive. So yes, I use a lot of music in my works all the time. I guess it is only natural, since music came to me first in life. I enjoy collaborating with musicians and the collision of ideas that takes place during the process. And I do go back to my original sources for inspiration every once in a while, especially when I feel down. Spinning Wire's *154* (1979), Kari Peitsamo's *Puinen levy* (1978), Devo's *Duty Now for The Future* (1979) and This Heat's first LP (1979) help me out every time.

KS — I would like to go back to your mention of failure above. So much of the literature around your work discusses it in terms of your interest in utopias and your treatment of utopic situations and visionaries. But I think it is important to point out that you are investigating their failures if not even more so – the Futuro house's swift demise, the lab footage lost in anonymous archives, and, of course, the continual obsolescence of various media, which demonstrate technology's implicit failure (or resistance) to evolve alongside us (and vice versa). I also think of hubris, or the classic myth of Icarus flying too close to the sun – the anticipation of failure – which we see in works like *RoboCup99*, *The Most Electrified Town in Finland*, and *Six Day Run*. What draws you to these doomed or threatened narratives?

MT — It could be just the stubborn notion that collapse makes for more exciting drama than somebody being really successful and competent. The fragile, the unfinished, the incomplete is something easy for me to relate to. And it is very human, too! Because of the time element, there is drama lurking in most of my works. Over the years, I have been asked to make all kind of commissioned documentary works, but basically I have turned them all down. I could never make a film about a "success story" unless I could find a really fresh angle on it.

KS — Building on this issue of failure or collapse, in working with you on our exhibition, it has become even more evident to me that from photography to installation, much of your work specifically addresses the history and materiality of the videotape. Can you talk about your interest in VHS, as well as in the question of technological obsolescence more broadly?

MT — My fascination with VHS involves various aspects of memory. First of all, it is part of those tender years of my childhood and early adulthood. Watching the world on magnetic tape and learning to record things off TV or on my own with a video camera has definitely influenced me. The look of grainy third-generation VHS tape is simply so familiar and pleasing. It is imperfect and therefore invites one as a viewer to participate more actively than an ultra-clean digital copy does. On the other hand, VHS functions much in the same way as our brains. As I age, I notice everyday that I am not remembering things so clearly anymore. Just like analogue tapes, I am losing data little by little. This slow process is sad and tragic, but it can be also merciful. What a burden to be able to remember everything! So VHS and audiocassettes are very human formats that mirror my own way of thinking.

There is a question of balance between these disappearing formats and our future world. I do not think that I have a strong preference of one format over another. I love the fact that what we have now is a

rather chaotic and random existence of various formats from different eras simultaneously. Those archeological layers are fantastic. One question with these smooth digital tools is the accelerated speed of work efficiency. We can copy digital files faster than our mind can adapt to what is being seen and heard. The overload and anxiety of too many unwatched files is constantly around the corner.

What results is a series of paradoxes. I do not really feel that I am that techno-logical a person at all, yet I am working with technological issues in most of my works. And instead of a pen or paint, I am working with so-called instrumental distance – film, video, cameras, computers, and several other digital devices. My work is all about this tension.

KS — Several of your projects have involved long-term deep and rigorous research, as you allude to above. I am thinking about *Futuro – A New Stance for Tomorrow*, which exists not only as a film but also a book; your work with Erkki Kurenniemi, which has become the documentary *The Future Is Not What It Used to Be* as well as the DVD compilation *The Dawn of Dimi*; and now *The Most Electrified Town in Finland*, which you began shooting in 2004 and are currently in post-production on the related documentary, *The Return of the Atom*. Tell us more about your research process and these projects that lead to further ones.

MT — Some issues are not easily resolved. With the Kurenniemi film *The Future Is Not What It Used to Be*, I feel that I only touched the tip of the iceberg, but I knew that already while making the film. His visionary thinking is exploding in so many directions in time and space that it would have been impossible to capture it all in some totalizing way. That film is only a suggestion of how one could look at his lifelong experiments. I knew it was only my subjective take on things that I felt strongly about at the time. Someone else would make a totally different film on Erkki emphasizing different topics. That is one of the true beauties in documentary filmmaking. You need to be subjective – and proud of it. In Erkki's case, the story continued so that we became good friends after the film. After that there have been several music releases by Erkki with which I was involved. I am intrigued by the concept of revisiting. *Radio On* (1979) is one of my all-time favorite films. It is stunning and so multi-layered. I can understand why Chris Petit then went back and made *radio on (remix)* (1998). I am also very fond of Ken Jacobs's *Return to the Scene of the Crime* (2008). There are not too many great ideas you can have in a single lifetime.

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