



Toute la mémoire du monde - *The memory of the entire world*

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Meeting:

86 — Plenary Session

1. EXCERPT: G W Pabst: DON QUIJOTE

An excerpt from a movie from 80 years ago: the film classic *Don Quijote*, directed by G W Pabst, the German silent movie legend and soon-to-be emigrant. An example of how the arts comment on each other. The style is epic theater of its day, the literary basis is the novel by Cervantes, the lead role is played by the great Russian bass Fjodor Shaljapin. And history is also present. In the same year, book burnings were started by Goebbels.

You saw how paper slowly appeared from the fire: the effect is fantastic, emotional and fervent. The victory of the book has been proven. Even in a situation that seems impossible, the book survived.

During the past decade, I completed a broad undertaking called *Sininen laulu* (Song of Finland), both a 12-hour TV series and a comprehensive book: the story of the arts during the century of independent Finland. The arts are generally dealt with individually, but my aim was to capture the common ebb and tide as well as meeting points of painting, music, film, theater and literature, of which the contemporary actors – i.e. the artists themselves – have not always been aware. It is probably typical of my generation to emphasize literature by placing it in the starring role in any presentation. In a small country, one's native language, the vehicle by which only we can describe the world in our own specific way, is one of the greatest treasures.

At the same time, one fact having specifically to do with books, definitely grew to be a main heading in the series: how future writers and artists, raised in humble

circumstances, sometimes decided to read through the whole collection of books in an often small village library. They read story books, novels, factual information, handbooks of various kinds. It was not a matter of level but span: life and its glory, life and its trivia. Books requiring mental effort on the one hand and practical action guides on the other overlapping. Classics were appreciated in a way that is only a shadowy memory today. This emphasis was in most cases insisted upon by the librarian, their fairy godmother and first advisor. The insight is the great “I Live” of Finnish culture – which is, incidentally, also what is said to be the last words by our national author, Alexis Kivi.

2. EXCERPT: Part 1, beginning of Song of Finland

In my opinion, almost no detail points us to the inner being of Finland as well as does the position of the library and the individual stories which abound. It also includes the self-evidence of equality: this road to education is closed to no-one. Many of the finest Finnish authors were not able to get a university or college education, but their all-round knowledge (German *Allgemeinbildung*) and human understanding, as well as their broad sweep of learning, beat those of any academic.

Väinö Linna, a factory worker from Tampere, in 1954 published the novel *The Unknown Soldier*, which became the widest read book in the country, a therapeutic key to the un-expressed traumas of war. Linna continued with the trilogy *Here, Beneath the North Star*, which related the life story of one tenant farmer family for over 60 years, from the 1890s to the 1950s. University-educated quarters tried to deny various interpretations, and Linna countered – and we know that his information was more solid and researched.

It feels great to be able to add one more detail: Linna’s spiritual home was in the city library in Tampere – which is the second largest city in Finland, and the only one which is sparked by working class culture. Head librarian Mäkelä established a “reading circle”, which meant the growth of chains of everything significant: the presence of world literature, conversations between alert, knowledgeable people, analytical critique, strengthening of the individual artist because he was a full citizen of good literature.

Linna may be a familiar name to some of our foreign guests, even though he has not become the world famous name that most Finns feel he should be, on clear merits. I will mention another name: Pentti Haanpää, a professional writer, who lived in a small village in northern Finland, and who had trouble finding publishers for his works particularly in the 1930s. His descriptions of the Depression and World War I, both of which were global phenomena, are unsurpassed. Through a personal linguistic style he penned the truth about a remote, unassuming life, which also included a kind of individual type of wisdom – a rebellion against the cynical selfishness of a Finland governed by the higher-ups.

Many of us feel that Haanpää belongs at the top of world literature. If our opinion is true, does this not prove that the notion is relative and a matter of consensus? Haanpää has not been translated, so no foreigner can experience him as an equal of Hemingway or Gogol as a master of the short form. How many locks are there not on the door to the finest identity of small nations?

Now someone is already sure: I am trying to nostalgically resurrect the past – into which, however, we can not return. I am trying to bring back as a model a Finland, whose existence was based on the forest industry and agriculture. Not so, however: the past is important because it may also contain the future. As applied to libraries: a more active role, and an emphasis on the book as an object, that is what is in danger. I am in fact so much of a conservative that a shift of emphasis to CDs, DVDs and videos is not at the top of my affections.

My next excerpt is from a famous French documentary. *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956) describes man through various objects produced by the human mind. This documentary, which formally deals with the French National Library, is a voyage of exploration into man's consciousness: an analysis of its monumental, fantastic, fantasmagoric illusion that we know something about ourselves and that "the memory of the whole world" is gathered in one place.

The camera work is one of the features of Resnais early productions.

The first shots on the roof, still on the outside of the library, are already some kind of mystery play. The strange building complex hides a network of secret currents: the whole of human knowledge and alchemy. The labyrinths are the hidden tasks, of which the architectonic details are symbols. The place that receives three million volumes a year is the same as man's opinion of himself, the full irony of our complacency concerning classifications (the catalogue is "the brains of our national library") and civilization.

A warehouse landscape filled with books is also full of ironies. It is a kind of comedy of proportions: the quantity defies probability. A library is also the symbol and general view of human effort, a vanity of vanities, and yet a precise picture of the best we have, a view of the riches of life. Book learning on the one hand and trivia on the other are disassociated life. The spatial impression reflects the same paradoxes. With its upper corners and by its expansion through long corridors it is like a great room in an absurd theater analysed through film and enlarged – Orson Welles portrayed Kafka (*The Trial*) with the identical images a few years later, but with less success.

The viewer is enclosed in a devotional, comical and spiritually generous atmosphere. Books are handled as if they were people and they are some kind of secret introduction to the role, dreams and hopes of man – the dream and hope that books would be the way to something and would be "pieces of the simple secret that is called happiness".

3. EXCERPT Alain Resnais, TOUTE LA MÉMOIRE DU MONDE

How then does a personal library relate to a public library?

Since I have not had a dog after I grew up, I can say that a library is man's best friend. Many books wait for years for their turn. The only clear fact is that their turn comes. I am against the prosaic notion that only a book that is read is something. Books always exist in relation to one's own capabilities. A library is continually in a state of change: the best books may slumber for years and then become the objects of completely inordinate curiosity and handling. The list of unread books will be long

on Judgment Day. They have provided companionship. Something of their presence has stuck.

A book is a touching experience. When I think of my numerous trips to New York during the past 40 years, book stores have been almost my most important pilgrimage goals. But in the past year I have been there twice and have had chocks, and then realized with sadness that the chocks are probably final. Most of the familiar and high quality book stores are gone. The same phenomenon is taking place elsewhere as well, accelerating the trend which has been coming for a long time, that of a conversion of so many books stores into mere distribution points for bestsellers or into stationery shops.

For this reason as well, libraries are more valuable than ever. And in my opinion, expressly loaded in a way where the traditional role of the book is strong. In my opinion it is enough that the media underestimate the mental level of people; the starting point for libraries should be our curiosity and need to create larger wholes than ourselves. The “complete works of n.n.” on the library shelves are miniatures of origins of the worlds. Just as they are an image of the thought processes of a creative humanity.

When an active person steps into a library, something of the information is already disseminated: the atmosphere and the common understanding and the company of other book-loving persons. Ray Bradbury’s novel Fahrenheit 451 is a beautiful description of a world where books are banned.

I will return to the spontaneous projects of passion in Finnish villages: that everything must be read, from cover to cover. Is the result supposedly all-round knowledge which, however, won’t compare with the seemingly unlimited potential that the net, Google and Wikipedia. What concreteness is there in such a hypothesis? Self-made, the result of a dialog.

There are many ways to utilize a library: it can be used systematically, it can be used chaotically. Mediocre and even bad books, trivia and gardening books, have an impact and contain their own wisdom. Just as in the mediocrity of life, of which the entire equation may be read, as Anton Tchekhov knew. The library is still, and emphatically in the era of Google and Wikipedia, a basis for all-round knowledge. Or as expressed by a horror of a term: civilized all-round knowledge.

This is an especially important fact to be said in just Finland, where technology and being in its vanguard have been made an ideal and an idol to be worshipped. That the consciousness of our being has grown thinner is a concern that has been expressed many times. Getting information has become so easy that the process of consciousness is skidding past the possibility of synthesis. When I look at my students I have almost given up hope that they study good movie books, as was done earlier. They are all irrevocably children of new thinking – paradoxically, they are able to gather information in quite different amounts than people in my generation, including myself, but as a result of the angles of knowledge creation I am not sure what they know. At least during lectures they do not recognize the names of significant Finnish writers, if I refer to them.

The fate of all-round knowledge is confounding me: has something ominous happened to Finland, drunk on technology? I often think that something portentous has struck the technologically drunken Finland. Finland may be in the forefront of Pisa and other studies, but there is an ironic shadow following our understanding: there are so many negative indicators: disregard for history, alienation from all-round knowledge – are we perhaps being alienated from both a welfare state and a civilized nation.

One might become a pessimist – if it wasn't for the institution of the library, which has been meddled with, but not too fatefully so far.

After returning from the USA after teaching there in the 1970, I can still remember some of the details I recounted of situations that in my opinion were examples of surrealistic ignorance. Now the time for jokes is over. There are too many examples in my environment, and clearly our grip on both a civilized country and a welfare state is slipping. The new division of wealth is just as unequal as in our eastern neighbor. The idea of the newly rich class is spreading and the media are supporting it openly: admirable are those who amass most wealth, regardless of the consequences.

It is hardly a coincidence that the schools are the milieu of our most tragic murders. Learning is damaged from base to top. Some Finnish schools are doing away with the chalk boards, replacing them by electronic monitors. The information shown on them is automatically transferred to the students' computers, from which the users can check the data later. The process of learning is changing: instead of memorizing, students will look up data. Will information be internalized? Will thinking and memory atrophy?

As an aside, a salute to the city you are visiting as honored guests. "Helsinki Forever" is a movie collage from 2008. It contains not a single new image, but the free dialog has them from a period of 100 years: fiction, documents. The input of other forms of the arts is important: painters, writers.

The film is very personal, starting with life events. The little boy coming to the city in the beginning of the sample could be me. The collage is a method used in all branches of the arts, in this instance all those arts are part of the dialog. The film has its own niche, just as does each sector of the arts which is not covered by, for example, literature. And I am not sure that any other genre of the arts could try for the same kind of scope as here:

- history of a century
- the century of the city
- a story of faces: ordinary people, actors or "stars"
- dialog between the various arts, again over a century.

Something like "Helsinki Forever" exists, you know. The structure is probably as complex as in many works of modern art that divide the people who experience them, but I hope it is intimate – and the easier it is, the more difficult is the equation

being constructed. I feel I have moved forward – this is a rationalization made afterwards, because the creation process was completely spontaneous – toward an easy end result by adding complexity, and my reward has been very simple: I don't know that anyone watching the Helsinki movie has lost their bearings, even though it is just as "difficult" as the novels of Faulkner and Claude Simon. For this reason it was gratifying to receive from Portugal an article that compared the film to Orhan Pamuk's city novels.

The film includes many views of the transience of valuable things and at the same time indications of the city's eternity – which is not attached to a single existing building, but is instead an invisible circumstance. The location is eternal, its manifestations temporal. If the great theme of libraries is memory, it is often so even in literature. The strange charisma is being able, with a 50 year-old picture, to tell of things past just as expressively as Marcel Proust did on 10 pages of text.

4. EXCERPT: "HELSINKI, FOREVER"

Some of you may remember that the flight route of the great dramatic writer Bertolt Brecht went through Finland. He was here 1940-41, and if you go to the Helsinki railroad station restaurant – we visited it a moment ago – you will experience the site of Brecht's "fugitive discussions" (Flüchtlingsgespräche).

The poet wrote at the time that the Finns are a people who can keep silent in two languages. The silent people have learned the rites of mobile phone quasicommunication at a frightening speed. Never-ending talking began, the phoning home when one is 50 yards from arrival - such absurd customs have replaced the silent, listening and receiving mode. Previously we were a solitary exception among nations, a people who did not know how to "small talk", but now, to put it succinctly, with our special modification we are degenerating.

Therefore it is important that the silent, hearing, receptive kind of communication – the historic achievement of the libraries – retains its vitality. The creation of the world in miniature is on the shelves of the libraries. Uniting materials of various and non-commensurate levels with one's own consciousness is a significant, basic action, an inner core of humanity. Without it both the leadership of nations and individual lives have gone to the dogs. Books are the firmest foundation for that union.

Next I want to introduce the film director Aki Kaurismäki, one of the most important of our artists. We have very few people of world renown. Who could it be from literature? Who from painting? Movies have one, Aki Kaurismäki. Good for us, since his entire creative existence has been activated by an interest in literature – probably in somewhat similar circumstances as those I described in the beginning.

The central theme of a director is silence. When he deals with it, the theme emits a great respect for words, the basis of which is a wide range of reading. No unnecessary words. The images show the Finns and their blessed unadaptability, incompetence and ridiculous – and maybe praiseworthy – helplessness in regard to small talk. Unbending, indomitable. The respect for books and words is felt directly in the

wonderfully clean images.

EXCERPT: being silent, THE MATCH FACTORY GIRL

In *The Match Factory Girl* we move within the outer limits of pastiche, i.e. clichés of Finnishness are combined in an almost angular manner – everything in the movie is so ordinary that nothing can be more ordinary, starting with poor Iris (as the main character may be called in the spirit of H.C.Andersen). Her pathetic family is one of the most unbelievable, even on the scale of Finnish films. Tracking it is almost sufficient reason by itself to see the film. The boorish and brutal, emotionally handicapped stepfather and the bottle of booze, which he hides under the table during meals.

The mother in family and her tired persona are close to autism – the sum of indifference and alienation in relation to both the immediate life environment and to the events in the wider world. The home is bare and almost ugly. The mother looks after the routines of its things and human relations as if they were scrubby plants in a desert.

As expected, the TV is a member of the family, always open, the tuning image clearly providing enough of a mental stimulus.

EXCERPT: THE CLOUDS FLEE

The spirit of the Finnish Winter War is one of the most legendary Finnish concepts, with the motto “A pal is never abandoned”. The background consists of the stories of a three month long war fought in 1939-40 amidst record setting frosts, and of its almost miraculous effect on the feelings of solidarity among the Finns. The association has rarely been expressed more beautifully than in a scene in “*The Clouds Flee*”, in which the drunkard cook of a restaurant is brought back from among a bunch of bums when a new start is in the offing – and he rises from his degradation to become a fine professional. The episode is the purest and most personal *Kaurismäki*.

The precise resonance of such scenes is in the subconscious of Finnish viewers. Surely its conscious machinery also touches a foreign audience.

The fictional Tatjana of the 1960s is a skilled and poetic synthesis of the signs of the times as well as anachronisms. Valto, the coffee drinking son and helper of his seamstress mother collects himself and shuts his mother in the closet. He takes to the road, as so many “Finn-film” heroes have done. When he is on the road, he fulfils himself to the hilt, as if in some kind of silent dream moving forward through non-events.

The camera is able to show us levels and observations of Finland and a country of the past decades that no other medium is capable of to this extent. The Tatjana, who exists in a no-man's land of time and place, also calls for a special style and sense of styles by her cinematic recorder. It is an assignment which can only be carried out at this inspirational level by Timo Salminen, the principal cameraman for all of Kaurismäki's films.

The geopolitical position of Finland between East and West is a situation of which the association to the latter – the influence of the West – is often emphasized, or overemphasized, by the Finns, while of that to the former – the role of the East and the Slavic influence – is preferably kept quiet, at the same time as it shines through everything, often in a comically clear manner.

The State slurps coffee unendingly, our friend Reino knocks back booze. Two Finnish national beverages. The Finnish yokels meet two women, an Estonian and a Russian. They connect in a non-verbal friendship. The effect is like a fairy tale, simultaneously poetic and Homerically funny (the scenes in bars where Pellonpää opens a bottle of booze, downs it idiotically and quite clearly to open communication that never happens). A nation that keeps silent in many languages.

EXCERPT: Finally a humorous piece from TAKE YOUR SCARF OFF TATJANA.