

## **Tales of Community**

*Contrapuntal* (2005) is an installation work consisting of three short films, which take their starting point in the street musician Juha Kiwano and the music he plays in the streets of Helsinki. For the second part of the installation, composer and conductor Olli Koskelin has used Kiwano's music as the basis for a choral work called *Fluctuation theme*. Meanwhile, in the third part of the work, saw player Antti Halonen comments on the choral work with a composition of his own. But the works of these composers have not just been influenced by the music they were given, but also by the location of each of the films – they approached their task with these two factors in mind. Each of the compositions in this integrated artwork matches the impressive filmic narrative, which has been directed and realised by visual artist Jani Ruscica and his team.

### **Events and main characters**

The first part of the trilogy *Sawdust theme*, begins with a close-up of the leaves of a tree and of the light percolating through them. We see close-up details of nature on a spring morning – a fern leaf, a spider's web, a glistening wet worm – and we hear the sounds of nature. Soon, we also catch the unhurried sound of sawing and, a moment later, the user of the saw himself comes into the picture. He stops working and lies down to rest on the soft forest floor. The camera shifts, seeing through the man's gaze, to the sky, we begin to hear the strains of saw playing. The landscape opens up to reveal a logging area, and alongside the saw playing we hear the buzz of a chainsaw. Into our field of view comes a Nordic walker with staves – the musician looks up and stops playing. Background music begins, unhurried guitar effects, and more Nordic walkers with staves enter our field of vision. The first part of the trilogy ends.

The main character in this short film is a young man, whose habitus has a bit each of the elf, the eco-activist, and the archetypal wise old man. The man's long, white hair hangs loose, his bare toes dig into the soft moss, his baggy, forest-green clothing is well-worn and comfortable. He is at one with nature, it inspires both his work and his music. The clatter of the Nordic walkers' staves interrupts his playing. The urban Nordic walkers come into view, the player's gaze follows them gently. He is part of the community.

During the written intro to the second part, we hear the regular thud of a pile driver, which leads us to the setting for *Fluctuation theme*. We see a barren landscape: a building site, where there are piles of stones and gravel, machinery, and in the distance sea and sky. A band of people are walking in an amorphous group, in slow motion, towards the seashore visible farther off. We see

slowed-down close-ups of the group, who are singing a work composed for a choir. As the climax of the piece approaches, the camera angle shifts to high up, the horizon disappears and, for an instant, we see only sky, until the camera comes back down to earth. Before us there unfolds a landscape, cropped in the spirit of Romanticism, a dock area under construction: the horizon is low down, the dock area visible as a thin strip at the bottom of the picture, the sky large and looming. The choir exits in an orderly file, their singing mingles with the sounds of the machinery. The crash of the pile driver closes the work's auditive circle and ends the work.

The main character in the second work is a collective, a group of people, who wander free in a group around the dock area under construction, where we can see no nature, no city, only in-between space. This constellation is reminiscent of a pilgrimage: a group on the move in a barren (mental) landscape, on a positive mission that will strengthen their community. The realistic sounds and the machinery of the construction site can be spotted from time to time, but the group is in its own world, sucked into the ethereal slipstream of the choral work and the desolate landscape: the mood of the film has a hint of something holy, something spiritual, about it. The landscape and the actions of the main characters are seamlessly interwoven – the in-between space and the movement from one place to another, the wandering, the transition. The work itself is clearly an image of the trilogy's transitional phase, too, but also an ambiguous metaphor for human life, for a quest to balance inward and outward reality.

The third part of *Contrapuntal* is set in an urban environment, and starts with shots of skateboarders, with the sound authentically matching the image. Street musician Juha Kiwano is getting ready for a performance. He is arranging his original musical instruments: various household items and contraptions made out of them and a few real instruments. The performance begins. We see people stopping to listen, and their reactions. Kiwano, too, seems to enjoy the performance. When it is over, he takes off his feather-duster-decorated pan headdress and his woollen ski hat and throws them down in front of him, having given his all. The gesture contains a hint of surrender, disappointment and fatigue.

The main character in *Kiwano's theme* is the street musician, not necessarily a social outcast, but someone who follows his own path, anyway. He takes a risk and seeks contact, approval, for his art and his existence, as he is. The public's reactions are inquisitive, positive, and several listeners show approval and appreciation. One drops a coin for him. To me, the street musician is the most individual of all the figures in the trilogy, an individualist typical of urban life and this age, who displays both courage and pride in his own choices and, on the other hand, disappointment, even sorrow at his place outside of society, outside of the system.

This, the final part of the work, is significant in the sense that, in its total realism, it seems to call into question both the image given by the first part, of the idyllicness of life, and to challenge the metaphoricalness of the second part. This part seems to ask whether life is beautiful, easy and unambiguous, or also ugly, hard and ambiguous? What is happiness and how is it achieved? How can you be true to yourself and yet achieve the so intensely longed-for approval of society?

## **Polyphony**

The origin of the title of the work – *Contrapuntal* – is the musical term *contrapunctus*. Contrapunctus is particularly associated with a stylistic device typical of western music, in which different compositions are played simultaneously. The term comes from the Latin words '*punctus contra punctum*', which means 'note against note', referring to the polyphony mentioned above. The title of the work, the adjectival form of the English word counterpoint, *Contrapuntal* could thus be translated with the words 'playing at the same time' or 'polyphonic'. The idea is that the structure of each melody brings its own contribution to the collective polyphony and, correspondingly, the whole has to support and comment on the structures and individual sounds of each distinct composition. During the work's creation phase, Ruscica's plans included the idea that the distinct compositions in its three parts would all be audible at the same time in the installation version of the work. This musical experience has so far remained untried, but I believe that the idea of polyphony is applied more interestingly in the polyphony of the content of the work's different parts.

The film researcher Henry Bacon analyses the way that the elements of a film underpin the unity of the film, and proposes the use of the terms *diegetic* and *non-diegetic*. Non-diegetic material refers to the factors that belong to the film, but not to the *imaginary world*, i.e. the *diegesis*, that it creates. Among the most obvious non-diegetic material is the film's background music. (Bacon 2000, 26) From this viewpoint, the composed music in particular plays an interesting dual role in the two first parts of Ruscica's trilogy. On the one hand, the pictorial narrative in these films can be seen as being diegetic and the compositions as non-diegetic, as background music, in that they do not belong to the imaginary world created by the pictorial material in each of the films. The justification for this interpretation would be that the compositions were overdubbed in the studio and are not direct recordings of performances. On the other hand, both the narrative and the music can be seen as belonging to the diegesis, since each short film is a performance of a composed work in the same way as in a music video, i.e. in a kind of performance recording. But these short films also contain a world of sound beyond the compositions, one that is in turn purely

and solely diegetic. This primarily applies to the nature sounds in the first part, and to the sound of the Nordic walkers' steps, the buzz of the chain saw, and the clatter of the staves, plus the sounds of the building-site machinery, in the second part.

*Kiwano's theme* differs from the other parts of the whole in the diegeticness of its sound and music, in that the sound in it belongs throughout to the film's diegesis. Indeed, in the case of this part, the diegesis has to be understood as the *real* and not the *imaginary* world portrayed by the work, since this part of the trilogy belongs to the genre of documentary film. It is a recording of a performance, in which, in addition to Kiwano's music, we also hear the sounds of the street: the sounds made by the skateboarders, the sounds of Kiwano's preparations, of the traffic, and of the people moving around nearby.

The order in which the compositions in the different parts of the work came into existence is different from the order in which they are presented, to be precise, it is the reverse. As I mentioned at the beginning, the choral work *Fluctuation theme* was based on Juha Kiwano's performance, and then *Sawdust theme* on the choral work. Why is the order of presentation reversed? Ruscica has clearly wanted to stress the familiar linear causalities readable from the work, such as the cycle of the day from morning to evening – in the first part it is morning, in the second daytime, and in the third evening – and similarly with the cycle of the seasons from spring to autumn. The trilogy also takes us from the forest to the city (in other words, from a state of nature to civilisation), from light to darkness, and from clear information to ambiguous information. It is also significant how the different parts of the work represent *different kinds of time*: the first part the past, the second part metaphysical, timeless time, and the third part the present moment.

The most important narrative in the work as a whole, however, is the main characters' growing experience of increasingly unified communality, which runs through all the parts. In each story we can see an effort and a transition, from solitude to an experience of community, from diffusion to order. This interpretation is also supported by the series' stress on the role of music, both in the making of each work, in the completed work, and in its title. Music is traditionally a characteristically communal artform, an element that creates communality. It is a potent way of creating communal situations, reinforcing the community's values, and infusing a specific mood into the group in specific situations, such as in a rite of passage.

## Unity of narrative

The image of humanity and of the world in Ruscica's *Contrapuntal* trilogy is a positive one, likewise its message. It speaks on behalf of communality, security and acceptance. The title of the work also speaks on behalf of this interpretation, of polyphony, which is a feature of a good communal situation. This emphasis in its content situates *Contrapuntal* in the art-film genre specifically in the way that its message is an existential one – it ponders the meaning of life and values in general.

The trilogy is incredibly beautiful, undivided in its form and style, realised with professional skill and care. Bacon sums up these thoughts in his definition of the concept of unity associated with the form of the narrative film. This quotation from him provides an apt ending to my analysis of the character and significance of Ruscica's work:

"[...] the concept of form is not restricted to the story, but emerges from the composite entity of story, subject matter and style. And if the work lives up to the ideal of *unity* we can also say that all the elements of the film, its images and sounds, its scenography, lighting, acting, camerawork, editing, dialogue and music, along with the other sounds, support the needs of the story, the range of themes and/or the style. The unity of an artwork thus means that the work's components serve the whole, and that, when seen in the context that they create, its form is virtually perfect." (Bacon 2000, 23)

"Unity is not automatically a criterion of quality, but it almost seems as though the human mind were programmed with some kind of longing for form, or even unity. Amid all the chaoticness of life we sense in our perceptions and experiences some kind of coherence, a red connecting thread that would make life feel meaningful and manageable." (Bacon 2000, 24-25)

What is captivating about *Contrapuntal* resides in the unity of its form and in its visual beauty, which make the viewer feel alive and comfortable. The work, nevertheless, gets its 'edge' from the enigmaticness of the content of *Kiwano's theme*, which expressly aims at bringing about an experience typical of our day, of a paradoxical two-way split in life, of continually wandering the middle ground between opposite poles – such as between individualism and community.

*Paula Toppila*

(The author is Chief Curator of ProArte Foundation, art historian and freelance art critic.)

\* Reference: Bacon, Henry: "Audiovisuaalisen kerronnan teoria" (A Theory of Audiovisual Narration), Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden Seuran Toimituksia 792 / Suomen Elokuva-arkiston julkaisuja, Helsinki 2000.