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### **Kalevala, myths and visual arts**

Since the antique, visual arts and poetry have been regarded as “sisters”, that, at their best, complement each other. Verbalizations of images and visualizations of stories still indicate a close connection between these forms of expression. Works of art keep continuously revising and renewing the semantics of both word and image and making use of archaic symbols of myths.

We are still preoccupied with issues held forth by myths, such as origins, boundaries, secrets, future. Mythical discourses are categories of knowledge specified by the reciprocity of perceptions and the mind. Although the interpretations and applications of myths change from era to era, their structures and modes of inference are superhistorical in their slowness. Liberation from myths has been called the myth of our times.

In this presentation I look at some visual and verbal combinations of myths and their articulations, and discuss especially the mythical dimensions of Kalevala-themed art. Through a few contemporary examples I aim to show how myths penetrate various temporal layers and bring together elements from perceptual and irrational worlds.

#### **Kalevala as a mythical history**

Lönnrot subtitled the *Old Kalevala* (1835) “Old Karelian poems about ancient times of Finnish people”, which is indicative of his view of Kalevala as a presentation of mythical history. Kalevala, in all its versions, is an artistic composition of mythical history, i.e. an epic, which in turn is a vast, epic, time-enduring text presented in oral as well as literary form. Both myths and epics are cultural representations, in other words invented by people. (See on the conception of mythical history and the mythology of Kalevala poetry [Siikala 1992, 2004].)

For the New Kalevala (1849), Lönnrot wrote a clear model of two geneeses, in which the organization of the universe (the egg myth) is told first, followed by the appearance of a creator hero in a human form (Väinämöinen) and the birth of culture (fire and agriculture). Kalevala also ends, in a way, at two temporal thresholds: one is the beginning of chronology of our time and the other one the arrival of Christianity in our country. The former brings to an end the era of gods and creator heroes, exemplified by the disastrous quest for Sampo, the latter the epic period of heroic adventures and human activity: Louhi is reduced to a dove and Väinämöinen steps aside to make way for a new era and religion.

In the stories of Kalevala the passing of time is actualized as consequent phases relatively independent of each other. Traces of the past are swept away via stage changes and each twist brings something kaleidoscopically new to the preceding. Concerning the temporal consistency and effectiveness, Lönnrot himself has given a lot of thought to how the past should be presented in order to make it exemplary in the present and in anticipating the future, how to build a mythological epic to be historically lasting. His epic solution could be described as metonymical in that in it Kalevala is a singular representing plural and it is composed of a certain definite large number of poems (the variations in use) instead of a vast, indefinite body of material.

The tendency to perceive Kalevala specifically as a literary work, as fiction, has been reflected in representations of Kalevala in other fields of art (visual arts, music, theatre). The closer we get to the present day, the more versatile the spectrum of artistic renditions is. According to certain calculations, Kalevala-related compositions amount to around five hundred [Aho 2008: 82], and at least four hundred Finnish visual artists [cf. van der Hoeven 2009: 49] have visualized its characters and potential worlds. It's doubtful that anyone could say how many artists outside Finland and Karelia have interpreted its events. Kalevala has been set to stage dozens of times with hundreds of performances as well in Petrozavodsk, Budapest, Tallinn as elsewhere in the world, and, of course, around Finland.

The Hungarian Thalia-theatre, who performed four times on the main stage of the Helsinki city theatre in 1970 under the direction of Karoly Kazimir, brought joy to the performance of Kalevala, and laughter to the audience. In an interview with the Theatre magazine (6/70) Kazimir emphasized that the performance was not a dramatization of Kalevala but rather a dramatic synopsis, starring our own imagination. "We have

approached a pure work of art with a pure heart”. This novel, eclectic interpretation kind of woke the Finns up from a sleep of serious Kalevala pathos.

In the context of the national streams of the Kalevala process, Kalevala-themed comics, rock albums, role-playing games and other second hands of time are either ephemeral phenomena, or they can be seen as manifestations of interest towards cultural heritage by new generations. Personally I prefer the latter view. The contemporary motivations and changing meanings of both arts and science can, in the meanderings of time, drift quite far apart from each other. This year (2009), new Kalevala-themed works by modern artists have been exhibited both in the art museum of Petrozavodsk and in Helsinki in the Ateneum art museum, where the Kalevala exhibition will be on until August. Judging from the modern perspective, the variety of the interpretations of Kalevala is solely positive – and it has been one of the central objectives of Kalevalaseura – for almost a hundred years – to uphold the union of art and research.

### **The perceptuality of myths**

It can be reasonably stated that myths are a product of the imagination. This is to say, they are not accounts of historical incidents nor are they direct presentations of experiences or perceptions. Instead, they combine perception and mind, images and concepts, actual and potential worlds.

According to the peripatetic axiom “Nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses”. This empiricistic axiom crystallized by Thomas Aquinas is based on the Aristotelian doctrine of the perceptual world and the soul, according to which no things separate from perceptual things exist, so also the things existing in thought have to possess a perceptual quality. Impressions, then, are like perceptions except in that they are immaterial (On the soul, 3rd book, chapter 8). In the spirit of Thomas Aquinas, George Berkeley (1685–1753) formulated his famous thesis “esse est percipi”, i.e. to be is to be perceived, which has since given rise to various speculations, such as if there’s a sound of a tree falling if no one hears it. From time to time, the assumption of “esse est posse percipi” has been discussed, according to which also the possibilities of sense impressions are part of reality. Without getting into the fact that both Thomas Aquinas’ and bishop Berkeley’s formulations included a reasoning of God’s existence, perceptuality has played an undeniably important part in different versions

of empiricism. A central subject of contemplation over myths, the difference of nature and culture, is namely a dialogue between the mind and the perceptual surroundings.

The perhaps most well-known anthropologist of our time, who turned 100 last year, Claude Lévi-Strauss, has also been of the opinion that “the sense organs process stimuli and raw material into perceptions and empirical information” [Lévi-Strauss 1973]. This is an articulation system brought about by the human ability, one that continuously combines and takes apart various compatible and non-compatible elements. Such a process is subject to certain structural, functional practices characteristic of the human brain. According to Lévi-Strauss there’s no independent inherent meaning in particular terms or other parts in mythical presentations, but their meaning is revealed by the status given to the symbols by the whole system of the myth (Lévi-Strauss after [Sivenius 1987: 162–163]. Hereby it is also made clear that events of a myth do not occur in a linear manner but more like a simultaneous occurrence of several events. Even if there is nothing in the world as the Air-daughter descends upon the waves of the sea, there’s still the goldeneye, there are materials for nest-building, and apparently also a little bit of this and that and the other, allowing the story to unfold.

Anthropology, along with other sciences concerned with the past, has for a long time and with varying emphases been a field for debate on how to describe the models of vernacular thinking without including in the interpretation conditions unnecessary for understandability – such as the childlike nature of indigenous people. Sometimes the so-called expanded principle of simplicity has been applied to the vernacular world view, according to which the interpretative construct with the least amount of changeable elements would probably be the most accurate one.

From the modern point of view of folkloristics, though, there is no real reason for trying to correct the interpretations produced by the vernacular world view; rather, the aim nowadays is to try and understand in what ways perceptions concerning different environments have been meaningful, and why there has been so much existential contemplation over philosophies of life attached to them. Myths and texts dealing with the universe are, through their performers and audiences, always particular to a time and a place, even if they are met in similar forms around the world.

Explorer, ethnographer and later the president of Estonia Lennart Meri has written about lying in a teepee on the tundra of Kamchatka, looking at the sky through a hole in the top of the canopy:

*Lying like this next to a dying fire, staring at the sky via the gleaming tentpole, the eye and the imagination pick up two kinds of movement. First it seems that the space surrounding the North Star is static and the teepee is the one that, at nightfall, starts revolving around its own axis, the world's axis – the only thing existing in this emptiness. Then again, it feels like the sky itself – so closely mimicking the cone shape of the teepee – would revolve, and with it the whole atmosphere revolves around the home axis [Meri 1983: 156].*

Meri writes that he didn't think about the question of Sampo back then: "It appeared in my consciousness only later, as I stepped back into the literary world". In the literary world, he was met by various kinds of contemplations, on how a perceptual center of the world, a tree, a column, or a mountain meets many of the criteria of Sampo, such as roots, the bright-coveredness, and its circular, grinding motion. In the end, Meri is of the opinion that as perceptual, myths are multi-birthed and it is more fruitful to look for the roots of Sampo, instead of India, in the shores of Kisor, among the ostyaks, where Meri believes to have seen Sampo [Meri 1983: 77]. In this manner, the perceptions reinforcing myths are particular to their time and place, even though it may be possible to show their interpretations to be common, even universal.

### **Artists' Kalevala**

Couple of years back, an idea was born in the Kalevalaseura to invite modern artists to interpret Kalevala. The project was eventually named Artists' Kalevala and ten contemporary artists and composers participated, each producing a musical or visual rendering of a Kalevala poetry medley of their choice, in honor of the 160th anniversary of New Kalevala. All artists invited eagerly took on the opportunity.

Artists' Kalevala was executed by visual artists and composers of different ages and a variety of means of expression for their vision. The visual artists involved in the project were: Martti Aiha, Juhana Blomstedt, Ulla Jokisalo, Kuutti Lavonen, Stiina Saaristo, Risto Suomi, Nanna Susi, Marjatta Tapiola, Katja Tukiainen and Santeri Tuori. The composers were: Kimmo Hakola, Pekka Jalkanen, Olli Kortekangas, Einojuhani Rautavaara, Herman Rechberger, Aulis Sallinen, Jukka Tiensuu, Riikka Talvitie, Jovanka Trbojevic and Lotta Wennäkoski. All the artists were presented with the question of what do certain poems of Kalevala evoke in their minds, what they would consider to be their essence, and how they would prefer to interpret it in their work. All in all, the visual works of art amount to 18, of

which one is a sculpture (Martti Aihla; Three Words) and one a piece of video art (Santeri Tuori: One can fall off the table). The titles of the works are especially important in this project, as they create a connection between the poem and the image; apart from the titles, also the knowledge of their connection to certain poems of Kalevala guide the viewer's interpretation. The whole of the large exhibiton in Ateneum is also built, in a way, in a form of a story [see Mikkonen 2005: 181, cf. Ojanperä 2009].

According to Adriaan van der Hoeven, who has studied the art of Kalevala in Finland [van der Hoeven 2009], Väinämöinen has been by far the most popular, or most often portrayed character of Kalevala in the visual arts. Lemminkäinen and Kullervo fall clearly behind; of the male heroes, Ilmarinen has been portrayed most rarely. Of the female characters, Aino has been the most popular one, followed by Marjatta, Lemminkäinen's mother, Kyllikki and Louhi in a varying order. Still according to van der Hoeven, the most popular poems of Kalevala among visual artists have been the ones on Kullervo (31–36), Aino (4–5) and Väinämöinen's playing – and departure (41 and 44, 50). Especially Väinämöinen's playing – images bear a lot of reference to their cultural models: descriptions of mythical music already exist in the tales of the antique: music brings together creatures both living and dead as well as real and imaginary. People cried listening to Väinämöinen's playing, and so did Väinämöinen himself; his tears rolled into water and turned into pearls. Visual, oral and also literary sources – our oldest one being *Mythologia Fennica* by Cristfried Ganander (1789) – have described the effects of music and the reactions of the listeners; these verbal descriptions have later been selectively visualized in numerous paintings.

Out of the four hundred Finnish artists who have illustrated the motifs of Kalevala, van der Hoeven has picked the ones he considers the most important, from Akseli Gallen-Kallela to Hannu Väisänen. The list consists of 15 painters, graphic artists and illustrators plus nine sculptors. The peak, then, has been relatively narrow. It is conspicuous that all the artists mentioned by van der Hoeven are male.

It is interesting to note that in Artists' Kalevala, Väinämöinen is all but absent in the images, save for one exception (Stiina Saaristo: *The Last Man Standing*), as well as is Aino. Katja Tukiainen's work *Kevätjuhla / The Spring Fete* features Lemminkäinen, maidens of the island and the moon, who is, in the artist's own words, both a spectator and "a mother and Lemminkäinen's mother". Kullervo appears twice in the paintings of Risto Suomi, and even the "unpopular" Ilmarinen is seen in two paintings

(Marjatta Tapiola: *Ilmarinen*, Nanna Susi: *Niinkuin mies on / As a man is*). Louhi appears in two paintings (Marjatta Tapiola: *Louhi*, Stiina Saaristo: *The Last Man Standing*) and Marjatta in four works by Ulla Jokisalo (*Marjatta, Näkökulma / Viewpoint* I, II, III, IV).

It is clear that the most famous Finnish Kalevala paintings have been made by Akseli Gallen-Kallela, of which the ones presumably most well-known to Finns are *Aino* (triptych, 1891), *The Defence of Sampo* (1896) and *Lemminkäinen's mother* (1897). In the aforementioned painting by Katja Tukiainen, Lemminkäinen has been portrayed quite unusually compared to earlier paintings. The whole composition is now set on a stage, dominated by a massive, orange stream of Tuonela; the stage is lined by screaming trees. Lemminkäinen himself is shown in the lower part of the work, wearing a zorro mask, with a rabbit tattoo on his chest. The bird-women, siren characters sitting on tree branches, blow bubblegum bubbles. In the top right corner of the picture there's a long-lashed, round-faced moon, the mother (in the exhibited work the moon is a blinking animation projected on the painting). In Tukiainen's own words the whole is an "afterimage of my mental impression of Kalevala". The story of Lemminkäinen is a "school play, a midsummer night's dream, a spring fete". The myth, the fairy tale and the story are inseparably intertwined.

Risto Suomi's *Kullervo, cursing and going to war*, also wears a mask over his eyes. His suit and tie are of today, riding a bear refers to a mythical time. The lightbulb-headed "Little Helper" from Carl Barks' Gyro Gearloose comics pays silent witness to the occasion. What happens next? With two fingers in the gesture of vowing, accompanied by his beastly cattle, Kullervo in his flaming hair rushes – according to Kalevala – to Ilmarinen's mansion. The beasts kill Ilmarinen's wife, the daughter of Pohjola.

Also Stiina Saaristo derives from popular culture in her *Last Man Standing*. The man indicated by the title is a miniature-sized toy figure of Väinämöinen with an axe on its shoulder. All other dolls have already fallen down. The work depicts Louhi's revenge on the folk of Kalevala, that robbed and destroyed Sampo. Louhi, sitting in the middle of the picture, has sent out the diseases given birth by Loviatar, the daughter of Tuoni, to Kalevala. After Saaristo's own explanation, Tuoni's daughter is seen behind Louhi as a skeleton. On the other hand, skeleton is also associated with the daughter of Louhi's killed by beasts – the other one was turned to a seagull by Ilmarinen. In the picture Louhi is surrounded by shaman's furry familiar animals, the spreaders of disease. According to Saaristo her picture states,

among other things, an ancient truth: “Facing the wrath and revenge of a woman, man is quite helpless”.

Marjatta Tapiola’s *Louhi* is seen in the process of turning into a giant eagle that will soon give chase to the robbers of Sampo with a whole army under its wings. The works of Artists’ Kalevala are permeated with metamorphoses, relationships between humans and animals and shamanistic interpretations. Even if these works may lack an apparent connection to the tradition of Kalevala-themed art, they visualize, each in their own way, the very myths of Kalevala that people are concerned with today. It is also interesting to look at these renderings in the light of their partially answering the question of what a “women’s Kalevala” looks like. Whereas the last rune of Kalevala has usually been interpreted as a power struggle between old vernacular faith and new Christianity – which was Lönnrot’s own stance – Ulla Jokisalo sees this Kalevala poem on Marjatta “most of all a survival story of a pubescent girl, with its positive problem solving”.

The first image in Artists’ Kalevala-book is called Ilman Impi (Air-Daughter), the left-most third of Juhana Bolmstedt’s triptych *Alkukuvan jäljillä* (On the track of the primeval image). The remaining two are called *Synnyt syvät* (The deep Origins) and *Sulkunuotta* (The Seine of silk). The Air-Daughter has been of interest to several artists, all the way back to R. W. Ekman, who portrayed a beautifully floating, gauze-clad Air-Daughter in 1860. Air-Daughter’s descent into an empty world, on the sea waves, has also inspired the American performance artist Cherie Sampson, who has performed her *Her Blue Sea Fire* over the years in various surroundings. [<http://cheriesampson.net/iowa.html>]

Blomstedt’s Air-Daughter is an abstract, archaic phase, when nothing existed yet. And as nothing existed, there was infinity and endlessness, like on the surface of a moebius strip, which is seen in the image in addition to a horizontal plane. The strands of deep origins, described in the first poems of Kalevala and over the knowledge of which Väinämöinen and Joukahainen dispute, are placed in the centre of the triptych as wood foldings opening in two directions. And the third, rightmost part of the triptych, is named as the seine of silk Väinämöinen tries to catch Aino right after losing her.

Blomstedt has striven to portray an archaic state of mind, the world before its birth, the births, and the loss after birth. It is interesting that Blomstedt himself quotes words attributed to Cezanne, which state he tries to communicate what is “the most mysterious and found in the immaterial source of perceptions”. Thus the connection between the sensory



perception of myths and the mind's fundamental, archaic mode of functioning is also articulated in the Artists' Kalevala project.

### **Kalevala from the modern perspective**

Artists' images and scholars' words have often been crucial in the process of producing and evaluating meanings for Kalevala. With no significant ongoing dispute over Kalevala, does this mean that the objectives of scientific and artistic Kalevala projects have been fulfilled? If this was the case, the cultural history of Kalevala could be written out completely, from the beginning to the end. To my knowledge, this isn't a view upheld by anyone – at least not yet, or anymore.

During the cultural history of Kalevala, numerous interpretations and views presented have been excluded from the academical research and rejected from national discussion. This concerns, for example, the question of the meaning of "alternative" Kalevalas that pop up on the market every now and then. Perhaps this is a good time to take a calm look at the interpretative cavalcade of Kalevala and contemplate where the boundaries of different interpretations lay at a given time. This has been the aim of both Artists' Kalevala and *The Cultural History of Kalevala*, in which the interpretations have been traced from the early beginnings of Kalevala until the modern day and popular culture.

Also in modern-day Finland various hopes and fantasies of the past are being projected on Kalevala; the substance of the epic is brought forth by reinterpreting its themes in novel ways, parodying the praise-worn characters and by returning to the epic the joy and laughter that had temporarily vanished from its interpretations.

All epics are products of imagination drawing from the "immaterial source of perceptions". Their hardest core are myths, which are most productively examined as manifestations of lengthy duration. The imaginary reality of the oldest myths and their newest versions is based on conceptual skills of similar kind in the people of the past and us. Copies and variations confirm the absence of the original. Still the past can be revisited, experientially and especially metaphorically, it can be continuously touched and portrayed in novel ways.

We are linked to the traditions we're born and grown into, and to which we thereby belong, by the structures, lengthy durations and slow movements of culture. The comparison of texts written with different motives and for different audiences – to the broad public or to a narrow group of experts –

shows the variety of ways in which the presented interpretations of the past have been, and still are, used to justify mutually conflicting views of the present. Discussions on the past help us navigate in the present and guide us towards the future, since “it makes better sense to stay, than break off in the middle” [Kalevala 50: 535–536]

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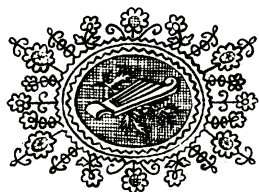
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**«Калевала» и мастера аналитического искусства**

В 1931 г. издательство «Academia» решило выпустить первое издание «Калевалы» в СССР. Инициатором издания выступил полпред СССР в Финляндии Иван Михайлович Майский, автором вступительной статьи «Из истории Калевалы», состоящей из четырех разделов, был Дмитрий Владимирович Бубрих, основатель советского финно-угроведения, будущий директор Института языка, литературы и истории Карельского филиала АН СССР. Видный ученый выразил общепринятые в те годы взгляды на «Калевалу», принимая миграционную теорию Каарле Крона и вслед за ним усиливая значение героев-богатырей и воинских сюжетов. По мнению Д. В. Бубриха, проникновение рун «Калевалы» к приграничным карелам было явлением весьма поздним и большая часть карелов «рун „Калевалы“ никогда не знала» [Бубрих 1933: XVI–XVII].

Словом, художникам под руководством Павла Николаевича Филонова (мастерам аналитического искусства) была дана установка оформить «Калевалу» как памятник католического Средневековья в западнофинской интерпретации, исторические корни которой восходят не к родственным финно-угорским народам, а к народам ближайшего окружения Балтийского моря, особенно к германцам.