PEKKA KAINULAINEN, PERFORMANCE ART AND VISUAL IMPACT. NATURE AS DISCOURSE

Haralambie Athes
Assist., PhD, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

Abstract:Themes like environmental protection, sustainable development and animal rights have been approached from a variety of perspectives. The link between the scientific community and the individual is represented by popular culture and its infinitely complex branches. The present paper focuses on a multi-faceted Finnish artist – from performance art and painting to writing lyrics for the band Amorphis, Pekka Kainulainen raises awareness on environmental issues and (re)defines the interconnectedness between Man and Nature in an intensely postmodern manner.

Keywords: performance art, environmental protection, man versus nature, Kalevala, ecotopia

If Guy Debord's book *The Society of the Spectacle* and Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation were simultaneously turned into one movie, the sum total of the rapidly shifting realities of today's world would be an accurate representation of the two visions. Debord morns the decline of the contemporary human society and its self-degrading pseudo-progress, with humanity having developed an unhealthy obsession with commodities and disregarding the fundamental values of meaningful existence. Satisfaction focuses on possession and displaying images of the latter. In Debord's view, the spectacle is a complicated process of authentic relations between people being expressed in a rather elusive way, through images – and these images tend to overwhelm all perspectives, all approaches and all visions of reality. Reality itself falls victim to a series of cultural mechanisms – from television and movies to the Internet – and is impacted by shifting and contradictory clues, with a perpetually dimming borderline between real and hyperreal. Consumer society, with its mass production and proliferation of information technology, resorts to signs as the ultimate carriers of meaning and constructs artificial utopias instead of trying to fix the real-world dystopia of the present. For example, issues like ecological disasters, the mass extinction of species and environmental pollution are counterbalanced and masked by the intricate mechanisms of popular culture, through giant theme parks, television shows about survival in the wild and picturesque images of untainted nature.

This is where performance art comes into play, as it contains the basic element that today's society is most fascinated about: the symbol. Simultaneously using the contemporary cultural norms and opposing them, performance art become a tool to create new meanings and shed new light on traditional issues. Through the absolute freedom of expression enjoyed by performance art, the connection between the artist and his audience gathers an additional layer of authenticity; however unconventional, performance art „happens" right in front of the audience, with spectators not even separated by the tradition on-stage/ off-stage dichotomy valid in most theatres. Pekka Kainulainen – Finnish artist, painter and poet – adds an even more far-reaching element to the connection established between performance arts and audience: a collaboration with the music scene. Pekka Kainulainen is the lyricist for the band Amorphis and features in

BDD-V5176 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:54 UTC)

one of the band's videos, „Wrong Direction", off their latest album, „Queen of Time". Subsequently, the context for Kainulainen's performance art has shifted towards a global audience. The artist had always been interested in investigating the subtle nature of the human mind and its definition of reality and, by gaining access to the metal community, he had the chance to display his ideas resorting to the discourse of music as well. Perhaps the most visually striking element that Pekka Kainulainen translated from his performace art to the Amorphis imagery is the Reindeer Man, a half human / half beast creature that appears in the video for „Wrong Direction" and bears a complex symbolism related to the interconnectedness between man and nature, the ancestral forces of life and the individual prevalent need to find himself in the midst of seemingly chaotic surroundings. The constant reference to mythology – and especially the Finnish epic poem „Kalevala" – acts as a subtextual reminder that all people and all their actions inherently contain the same roots, the same invisible need to connect to the higher energies that govern life and death. In an interview, Pekka Kainulainen underlined the struggle to grow one's inner mythology as the reason for living, the constant effort to allign yourself with the universe.[1] That is exactly what the Reindeer Man symbolizes, while painting new meanings on a green – read „ecologic" and „environmental" – canvas; the artist's perspective is always saturated with an innate conviction that humanity must not create an artificial distance from nature. However, in the typical postmodern manner associated with performance art, the viewer is left with the task of deciphering the message, of extracting the essential angles of a much broader artistic perspective. What Pekka Kainulainen does, through Reindeer Man, is shortcircuit the message – medium – recipient trajectory by appealing directly to feelings, and the effect is further augmented by the powerful lyrics and music of Amorphis. The video does not only tell the story of a man who has to climb a metaphorical mountain in order to find himself and come to terms with his identity, but a story of the humanity, with individuality being a tool to comprehend the universal.

In a media-shaped and online-accessed frenzy of finding happiness, each individual wants to create his personal utopia, as unique as possible, and as distanced as possible from the others' utopia. However, at the societal level, the idea of utopia is almost unanimously acknowledged, but differently articulated. According to the Baudrillardian perspective, the development of utopia is connected to the corresponding type of simulacra. The most coherent and conceptually harmonious is, consequently, the discourse of utopia related to the first order of simulacra – the natural(ist) simulacra, relying on the process of imitation and mainly using image as the fundamental element. Productive simulacra and simulation simulacra, based on energy and information, respectively, generate utopias that are more indeterminate, as they are both connected to a particular apprehension of reality. With reality having already surpassed fiction on so many grounds, the imaginary is no longer a pretext for the real. Once the reality principle has been cancelled by the complex socio-cultural devices of postmodernity, against a background of generalized simulation, the imaginary no longer needs legitimation. On the contrary, reality is the one that is undergoing a process of dissolution, of mutation into a non-attainable dimension, so that the real itself becomes the utopia of contemporaneity.[2] Instead of

[1] Interview with Pekka Kainulainen by Anna Luneva, 5.11.2018, published online at https://www.facebook.com/notes/anna-luneva/we-live-to-grow-our-inner-mythology/1018570961648663/
[2] Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Science Fiction", trans. Arthur B. Evans, *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3, November 1991

BDD-V5176 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:54 UTC)

designing improved versions of reality, projections of a better future or alternate realities that more adequately correspond to its dreams, humanity has lost contact with reality itself, being suspended between real and fictional. With television and the Internet as mediators between individual and society, on the one hand, and between society and nature, on the other hand, the individual also turns to popular culture as source of input – if not of coherent information, at least of meaningful ideas. Environmental protection is a concept increasingly preferred by pop culture, with music as one of the most efficient vectors.

What metal music and Baudrillard usually have in common is an utterly nihilistic vision of the world, of human existence, and a romanticized denial of the future. Discussing the possibility of accessing, in one form or another, an integral reality, and drawing upon Nietzsche's thoughts on the real world and the world of appearances, Baudrillard sees the world not only devoid of truth, but also devoid of any intention of finding it, of any need to encompass it. The universe of reconstructions and appearances takes the place of reality, along a trajectory marked by counterfeit and illusion. Thus, the individual is trapped between the lack of coherent justification for the world and the obsessive need for reality. The contextual intervention of the media in the process of deliberately obstructing the vision of the individual becomes a trademark for postmodernity; television alters perception, manipulates perspectives, confuses relations. Communication evades conveying a message, it becomes a tool for the generalized simulacrum conceived by a perpetually duplicating reality-shaped landscape. These are the same themes we find in Pekka Kainulainen performance art, with a significant distinction: in Pekka Kainulainen's imagined world, there is redemption, there is a way out, and the salvation, for the individual as well as for humanity, lies specifically in the endless element that fuelled "Kalevala", Nature itself. Even if the final lyrics of "Wrong Direction" are "Why did I shun the advice of brothers/ The fires on the mountain died", a seemingly tragic overture for a metaphorical lament, the imagery of the video creates a portal for hope, as the Wanderer eventually meets the Reindeer Man – so, he becomes one with himself, he achieves completeness, he finds his true inner self after a long journey. So it is not only the apparent ending that matters, but also the courage to seek self-discovery. Pekka Kainulainen creates characters who seem to take on a life of their own and, in their turn, display their hallucinatory worldview in a deeply emotional manner, triggering primordial responses in the audience and teleporting viewers into a novel dimension. The Wanderer and the Reindeer Man in „Wrong Direction" are coherent metaphors for the human condition in general and, set against the ecological issues that have accompanied the artist for more than forty years, for the destiny of humans in a planetary equation of destruction and reconstruction.

In a world where artificial ecotopias are gradually colonizing a reality marked by the rapid destruction of the natural environment, the individual can find a sense of renewed meaning in a melange of artistic visions, and Pekka Kainulainen's pastiche of performance art, mythology, ecological and environmental concepts, philosophy and music creates a distinctive haven for individual, community and society alike. The metaphorical content of „Wrong Direction" is not a distorted reference to a singurality in a world degraded by consumerism and further detachment from nature, nor is it a sermon for all Wanderers trying to find their true selves. What the video does, with the help of imagery specific to performance arts, is create a new vision through the aforementioned technique of pastiche. The metamorphosis of the Wanderer, be it pictured through fragmented lenses, is a symbol for past, present and future, and serves as an organic declaration of one need alone: that of being reunited with nature. Inner

BDD-V5176 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:54 UTC)

nature seems to derive from Nature itself here, and the human individual only finds coherence while facing his part-animal double.

The beginning of the "Wrong Direction" video resembles Fredric Jameson's perspective on humanity – we see essential individualism and disconcerting effort to (re)gain personal identity personified by the one who would later become The Wanderer, sitting alone in his cabin and gazing towards a distant mountain peak. Just as Jameson portrayed the ideas of individualism and identity,[3] we see a man who seems trapped inside a nostalgic, addictive use of the past in a futile search for a coherent contemporary representation. The metaphor Fredric Jameson employs in assessing the contemporary relation with time is that of schizophrenia – the individual has lost the sense of temporal continuity, becoming disabilitated by his own linguistic mechanisms in stepping beyond a fragmented present. Just like in the case of the schizophrenic, the signifiers are isolated, disconnected, the postmodern is indissolubly tied to the present – a present with fractures in temporality, shaped by capitalist rules and mass production; consumer society holds the set of rules according to which the individual can adapt to his present, through a simultaneity between an unending present and a continuous change. However, Pekka Kainulainen replaces desolation with hope, and erases isolation with strenuous search; The Wanderer begins to climb the mountain, vaguely distinguishing the reality around him from his own dreams, but aware of the powers of Nature. Pekka Kainulainen's performance art and his collaboration with the one of the most prominent representatives of metal music should not be apprehended as a mere postmodern version of environmental didacticism, but as a revealing, cathartic experience meant to revive ancestral instincts and an innate sense of belonging to Nature, with Amorphis's music and imagery functioning as the perfect vehicle for this complex meaning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baudrillard, Jean. "Paroxysm: The End of the Millenium or the Countdown". In *Economy and Society*, 26/4, November 1997

Baudrillard, Jean. "Simulacra and Science Fiction". Trans. by Arthur B. Evans. *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3, November 1991

Baudrillard, Jean. "The Ecstasy of Communication". In Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic*. Washington: Bay Press, 1983

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994

Baudrillard, Jean. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. London: Sage, 1993

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Illusion of the End*. Trans. by Chris Turner. Cambridge: Polity, 1994

Best, Steven; Kellner, Douglas. *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*. New York: Guilford Press, 1991

Best, Steven; Kellner, Douglas. *The Postmodern Adventure*. New York: Guilford Press, 2001

Best, Steven; Kellner, Douglas. *The Postmodern Turn*. New York: Guilford Press, 1997

Connor, Steven. *Postmodernist Culture. An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (second edition). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black and Red, 1970

Derrida, Jacques. *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles.* Trans. by Barbara Harlow. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979

[3] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Bay Press, Washington, 1983, p. 112

BDD-V5176 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:54 UTC)

Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Trans. by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978

Eco, Umberto. *Travels In Hyperreality*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias". In Edmund Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture*. London: Routledge, 1997

Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power". In Hubert Dreyfus, Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 208 – 226

Foucault, Michel. *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Trans.by A. M. Sheridan Smith. London: Routledge, 2002

Fuery, Kelli. *New Media: Culture and Image*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009

Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Avon Books, Inc., 1992

Jameson, Fredric. "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture". *Social Text*, No. 1, 1979, pp. 130 – 148

Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: the Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London: Verso, 2005

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991

Kellner, Douglas. *Media Culture. Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*. London: Routledge, 1995

Lyotard, François. *Just Gaming*. Trans.by Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979

Lyotard, Jean François. *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. by Geoff Bennington, Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984

Mannheim, Karl. *Ideology and Utopia*. London: Routledge, 1997

Manuel, Frank E. (ed.). *Utopias and Utopian Thought*. London: Souvenir Press, 1973

Rothstein, Edward; Muschamp, Herbert; Marty, Martin E.. *Visions of Utopia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003

*Interview with Pekka Kainulainen by Anna Luneva, 5.11.2018, published online at https://www.facebook.com/notes/anna-luneva/we-live-to-grow-our-inner-mythology/1018570961648663/

BDD-V5176 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:54 UTC)