

From *Sampo* to *The Age of Iron*: Cinematic Interpretations of the *Kalevala*

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Abstract

This article focuses on the films *Sampo* and *Rauta-Aika*, the most in-depth audio-visual interpretations of the *Kalevala*, both born at cultural interfaces: *Sampo* as a joint Finnish-Soviet production where Finnish research on the *Kalevala* met the Russian cinematic fairytale tradition, and *Rauta-Aika* as a meeting ground of two different media, film and television, and drawing on the visual arts, music, and opera. The article analyzes how these two interpretations of audio-visual monuments came about and how contemporaries saw their relationship to the *Kalevala*. Both films also signified the drawing of a boundary between historical and mythological views of the *Kalevala*.

Both re-interpretations sought to distance themselves from the more nationally isolated interpretations of the *Kalevala* tradition. In *Sampo*, this distanciation was visible at all levels from the production process to the film's style. *Rauta-Aika*, on the other hand, aimed at a materialistic re-interpretation from a monetary perspective. Despite their differences, *Sampo* and *Rauta-Aika* focus on the same problem, the interpretation of the epic through changing audiovisual narrative means. The filmmakers were also fascinated by the same theme: the *Sampo*, the wondrous *Kalevala*ic miracle machine.

The *Kalevala* is part of the symbolic capital of Finnish culture, a key work that has had a broad-ranging influence on music, literature and the visual arts. Cinematic interpretation of the epic has, however, been problematic, and the impact of the *Kalevala* on film and television remains smaller than the other art forms might suggest. Nevertheless, this fragmentary history tells not only of the changing interpretations of the *Kalevala* but also of the relations between film and nationality.

The first relatively serious attempts at filming the *Kalevala* were initiated at the end of the 1920s, soon after Finland gained independence. Most of the new film companies declared their intention to adapt such national key pieces as the works of Aleksis Kivi and Juhani Aho and the stories of the *Kalevala* for the silver screen. It may have been in response to these plans that the newly established *Kalevala* Society surveyed well-known artists and researchers, asking them: "How do you feel about the idea of presenting the *Kalevala* as a movie?" Some respondents were enthusiastic about the possibilities of the new media, and others, although less enthusiastic, yet believing in the universality of cinematic language, admitted that film might indeed be the best way to export the *Kalevala*. Still others were strongly against the idea, however; the realism of film was not seen as capable of capturing the "poetic and ideological sensitivity" of the *Kalevala* or its assumed national specificity, for example (*Valvoja*, 1920, p. 95).

It is perhaps no surprise that the new film companies' plans for the *Kalevala* did not materialize; limited resources, the reservations of the intelligentsia, and a slowly developing professionalism postponed the realization of several other major projects as well. In the end, the two *Kalevala*-inspired full length films that were completed between the World Wars – *Häidenvietto Karjalan runomailta* (Wedding in Poetic Karjala – a title used for export, 1921), filmed at the initiative of the *Kalevala* Society, and *Kalevalan mailta* (From the Lands of the *Kalevala*, 1935) – were not filmatizations of the epic but lengthy documentary films with folkloristic ambitions, turning to the *Kalevala*ic tradition for material. Actual filmatizations of the epic – or, rather, of selected parts of it – were not made until after the Second World War. Of these, the joint Finnish-Soviet production *Sampo* (1959) is the only full length fictional film on the *Kalevala* ever made for distribution in cinemas. The film *Rauta-Aika* (*The Age of Iron*, 1982) was made for television, where Riitta Nelimarkka and Jaakko Seeck's animation *Sammon Tarina* (*The Legend of the Sampo*, 1971–1974), for instance, has also been shown.

The focus of this article is on the films *Sampo* and *Rauta-Aika*, the most in-depth audio-visual interpretations of the *Kalevala*, both born at cultural interfaces: *Sampo* as a joint Finnish-Soviet production where Finnish research on the *Kalevala* met the Russian cinematic fairy tale tradition, and *Rauta-Aika* as a meeting ground of two different media, film and television, and drawing on the

visual arts, music, and opera. Our goal is to examine how these two interpretations of audio-visual monuments came about and how contemporaries saw their relationship to the *Kalevala*. Both films also signified the drawing of a boundary between historical and mythological views of the *Kalevala*. Of particular interest is what these two films – with their quite unique interpretations – reveal about the history of giving meaning to the *Kalevala*, especially when considering the fact that both were created during the Cold War era and both centered on the Sampo, a machine that brings material prosperity.

Sampo – A Joint Finnish-Soviet Film Production

The planning of the only full-length filmatization of the *Kalevala* for cinema distribution began from a Soviet initiative in the autumn of 1956 at the Finnish movie festival in Moscow. The proposal was initially received with apparent reservation, but a Finnish partner was found when Kustaa Vilkuna – professor of ethnology and a behind-the-scenes political influencer, central in the creation of the public image of the newly elected President Urho Kekkonen – became convinced of the importance of the project and contacted his friend Risto Orko, the director of the film production and distribution company Suomi-Filmi.

In the spring of 1957 a delegation from Mosfilm and the Soviet Ministry of Culture visited Finland and in May an agreement was signed between Mosfilm and Suomi-Filmi (Uusitalo, 1991, p. 336). The working title of the film was *Satu Sammosta* (A Story of the Sampo) but the final name became simply *Sampo*. Commencement of the joint production had great symbolic value in terms of foreign policy, as Kimmo Räisänen (2003) notes in his detailed, phase-by-phase study of the film project: not only was this the first large scale Finnish-Soviet movie cooperation, its very topic so closely associated with Karelia was still a politically sensitive one. Two other full-length coproductions were made later during the Soviet era: the historical film *Luottamus* (Trust, 1976), which dealt with Lenin's relation to Finnish independence, and the classic *Tulitikkuja Lainaamassa* (Out to Borrow Matches, 1980). In addition, Finnish film companies sought Soviet cooperation in the field of movie technology. For example, most early feature-length color films completed in the latter half of the 1950s were, like *Sampo*, filmed on the Sovcolor-system.

The main focus of the joint production was clearly in the Soviet Union. Viktor Vitkovich and Grigori Yagdfeld wrote the manuscript and

Aleksandr Ptushko, a famous veteran of fantasy films, directed it. Of the main actors, only Urho Somersalmi who played Väinämöinen was Finnish, all the others were Russians, Lithuanians and Estonians. Along with Vilkuna, Finnish folklore researcher Väinö Kaukonen provided *Kalevala* expertise, and he also wrote the Finnish dialogue. Other expert assistance was sought, for example, from the National Museum of Finland, in order to avoid “completely distorted details – after all, this film will give many people their first and perhaps the only glimpse of the *Kalevala* and of Finland” (“*Kalevala*: Pukuasiat, rekvisiitta”). Holger Harrivirta, an experienced cameraman, director and, like Aleksandr Ptushko, pioneer of puppet films, working at the short film department of Suomi-Filmi was made assistant director and the project's Finnish chief coordinator. Throughout the project Harrivirta made detailed diary entries, which he later turned into a colorful part of his memoirs. In part because of Harrivirta's diaries and in part because of the bureaucracy involved in the making of the film, *Sampo* is one of the most closely documented Finnish films made in the era of the large production companies.

It was not the aim, even this time, to make a straightforward filmatization of the *Kalevala*. The central characters are Lemminkäinen and Ilmarinen's sister Annikki, and events revolve around their love story and the forging and the plunder of the Sampo. Kaukonen (1959) noted that,

Based on the unusually rich imagery of the epic and on the ideas he has embraced from folklore and stories in the making of his previous great works, the director Ptushko has wanted to produce an independent art-film, the most common and important motifs of which are from the *Kalevala* epic, yet conceived of in terms of this new entity and adapted to its needs (Kaukonen, 1959, p. 51).

As Kaukonen explains, the events as well as the relations between the characters are thus different from those of the *Kalevala*, even if the main story relating to the forging and the plunder of the Sampo have been retained. In many ways Kaukonen was the perfect choice as the project's Finnish expert. First, while the production company Suomi-Filmi and its director Risto Orko were burdened by their right-wing politics and their association with Nazi Germany during the war, Kaukonen was active in many pro-Soviet organizations. Second, according to Kaukonen's interpretation, the *Kalevala* was in fact first and

foremost Lönnrot's composition, the material of which resided in folklore, but which was not authored by "the people" as emphasized by nationalistic interpretations of the *Kalevala* (Räisänen, 2003). Thus it appears that it was not particularly problematic from Kaukonen's point of view to combine materials in new ways and to introduce other themes from fairy tales and fantasy.

This does not mean, however, that the Soviet writers and Finnish experts agreed on everything. There were various tensions apparent from the outset of the project that also color Harrivirta's memoirs. Firstly, the Finns would have liked to stress the mysterious nature of the Sampo, fearing that it would be presented in too concrete a form. Harrivirta (1983) describes this tug-of-war vividly:

The Sampo appears four times in full view – I've tried to have it covered by smoke in between. The upper part is a trick – made with bits of crystal that flicker in all colours of the rainbow. At least it's an improvement. The original plan was a cross between some sort of automatic record player and an excavator, greatly resembling a wedding cake (Harrivirta, 1983, p. 284).

Kaukonen's originally skeptical view of the interpretation of the Sampo later became conciliatory. In writing of the making of the movie, he emphasizes that the Sampo became a realistically depicted, tangible mill that churns out flour, salt, and money, as well as a metaphorical and miraculous object, a provider of civilization and of eternal happiness. Thus the people of Kalevala are not deprived of their happiness even though the Sampo is destroyed at the end of the film (Kaukonen, 1959). Director Ptushko had likewise wanted the film to end optimistically, so as not to leave the impression that the Sampo could only be made once, and that it had been irretrievably lost. The description of the Sampo is reminiscent of Ptushko's earlier film *Kamennyy Tsvetok* (The Stone Flower, 1946), in which the Queen of Copper Hill abducts the young stonecutter Danilo, and holds him in a cave of her mountain to carve a perfect stone flower. In the end, the Queen frees her prisoner, but the miraculous flower survives in the mountain's depths.

Another central disagreement between the Finns and Soviets related to the proportion of realistic elements to fantastic ones. At the planning phase, Kaukonen hoped that the contrast between

Kalevala and Northland would not be emphasized and the North not be made too "grotesque" and "trollish." Indeed, the Finnish experts even perceived the sequences that took place in *Kalevala* in terms of historical context: Kaukonen (1959) locates the events a few centuries before the first crusade into Finland. For this reason, the grotesqueness of the North would only inevitably serve to emphasize differences and a good against evil setup. Harrivirta (1983), on the other hand, describes numerous instances in which he argued with the director about whether Annikki's falling in love could be illustrated by hanging red glass spheres from the pine trees, whether a huge field of tulips could grow beside a Finnish lake, or whether it was a good idea to portray the sorceress Louhi's journey from the North to Kalevala as a witch's flight on a broomstick. In some cases Harrivirta got his way, in most cases he did not. Here too, Kaukonen (1959) later smoothed over conflicting views, and said that the contrast encouraged a symbolic interpretation and thus made the work more poetic.

In the final film version, Kalevala and the North are thus portrayed as stark opposites, although not necessarily in quite the sense the experts had initially feared. Shot in various locations across Finland, Kalevala episodes clearly reveal a realistic and ethnographic objective: they include scenes of landscapes, fishing, forestry work, and wedding celebrations, and the costumes have largely been approved by the experts. On the other hand, Annikki is first shown in what is obviously a fairy tale forest, surrounded by tame bears and squirrels; such pastoral scenes have led later Finnish critics to speak of "Soviet Disney" (Räisänen, 2003). Be that as it may, Kalevala is lush and bright until Louhi steals the sunlight, whereas the North is dramatically lit and treeless, and events take place on steep rocky shores and in gloomy caves. The Northern sorcerers are almost exactly the trollish characters Kaukonen had feared, even though Harrivirta (1983) reports having at least been able to remove such details as feather headdresses from their clothing.

The copious use of cinematic tricks in *Sampo* probably also clashes with the original objectives of the experts since these again create associations with fantasy and fairy tale films. In addition to showing Louhi flying through the air, the film also shows a road and a birch tree coming to life, Louhi's magic cape flying to Kalevala and becoming a sail to Annikki's boat, as well as Lemminkäinen's mother walking across the waters to the North. Some of the tricks are simple: at the beginning of the film we are taken by dissolve

from Lönnrot's statue in Helsinki to a landscape by a lake, where actors clad in black rubber suits and posed identically with the statue begin their rune-singing and note-taking as Väinämöinen and Lönnrot. Other special effects involve such complex and impressive combinations of set design and lighting solutions, multiple exposures and rear projections, however, that even Harrivirta (1983), despite his overall objections, had to give them credit.

Many scenes that have clearly been fashioned on the basis of well-known works of art also create a feeling of fantasy or at least a highly stylized form of visual expression. The plowing of the adder-filled field, for example, has probably received inspiration from Akseli Gallen-Kallela's painting (1899–1900): the plowman has changed from Ilmarinen to Lemminkäinen but the angle of the camera, the shape of the landscape, the position of the horse, and the plowman's costume are all quite familiar. The scene of the forging of the Sampo can similarly be traced to Gallen-Kallela's painting (1893) – the model is obvious down to the fiery colors and the placing of the bellows. A similar bringing to life of works of art takes place in many other scenes from Väinämöinen's song to Lemminkäinen's mourning of the dead swan. This painting-like form of expression may well explain, at least in part, Harrivirta's (1983) constant complaint that both the camera and the actors move very little, and quite stiffly:

I railed at the cameramen for the same old reason: for making the acting stiff. It has a very rigidifying effect on actors on camera if they are forced into an uncomfortable pose and given strict limits on how to act. If we are after "tempperaament" – as P[tuško] says it – they also need some leeway.

The fantasy episodes, tricks and stylized imagery not only caused disagreement between the parties, they also prolonged the filming of *Sampo* and increased the production cost. Even the first outdoor filming in Finland stretched from a planned two weeks to a month and a half (Harrivirta, 1983); and in the Soviet Union the filming of the *Sampo* took more than a year: outdoor scenes in Yalta, Petrozavodsk and the surroundings of Moscow, and indoor work at the Mosfilm studios in Moscow. All in all, shooting lasted from July 1957 to October 1958, whereas the filming period of Finnish films typically ranged from a few weeks to a couple of months. Post-production in turn took another year, leading to

astounding production costs: total costs were estimated in the Finnish National Filmography to be about 1 000 million marks, when Finnish films were generally completed with, on average, 15 million (Uusitalo, 1991, p. 337).

The most important reason for the ultra high cost of production was, however, that many slightly different versions of *Sampo* were produced. First of all, the film was to be made in both Russian and Finnish. The usual solution would have been to film and record the movie first in one language and then to dub it into the other, ignoring problems with lip synchronization. The makers of *Sampo* were more ambitious, however: in the Russian version the actors – Somersalmi included – spoke for themselves; then all the scenes with dialogue were shot again for the Finnish version with the same actors having learnt their lines in Finnish. At the dubbing stage their voices were replaced with the speech of Finnish actors, giving excellent results in terms of synchronization. Secondly, each language version was filmed in two technically different formats: one in normal width and one as an anamorphic widescreen version. The camera angles are roughly the same in both formats but the widescreen is utilized especially in the creation of spectacular views: Annikki and Lemminkäinen's wedding scene, for example, shows the entire banquet table at once.

Many of the scenes in *Sampo* were thus filmed in four different versions – and as the director Ptushko would, according to Harrivirta, have scenes shot over and over again, a great deal more time and film was consumed than in filming an ordinary movie. In addition, also the editing of the film thus became laborious; there was, after all, an abundant amount of footage to choose from for each version. This was not helped by the fact that the editing stage was also plagued by conflicts about which party could use which scenes – especially as, at least in Harrivirta's (1983) view, the footage in Finnish was often better than the Russian.

Sampo finally premiered in October 1959, three years after the project had first been proposed. It is evidence of the film's exceptional nature, however, that it had been the subject of public controversy long before the premiere (Turunen, 2008). According to Kimmo Räisänen's (2003) studies of the press reception of *Sampo*, the Finnish media was split into two camps in the spring of 1957 when the project was first made public. The sale of the *Kalevala* to a foreign power was particularly vilified in the *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Ilta-Sanomat* newspapers. It was thought that

the Soviets would be unable to bring a Finnish spirit to the film and that the project would remind the outside world of Finland's dependence on the Soviet Union. The timing of the project was especially frowned upon – it came, after all, in the aftermath of the crushing of the Hungarian uprising. Key defenders of the project were the *Kansan Uutiset* published by the Finnish People's Democratic League and *Maakansa* of the Agrarian League (later the Centre Party), the party of President Kekkonen, who emphasized the importance of Finnish-Soviet relations. These newspapers stressed the artistic nature of the project and the fact that Finns have no exclusive rights to the *Kalevala*. They also reminded people that the Soviets could just as well have made the film without the Finns, as director Ptushko had indeed pointed out.

When *Sampo* premiered, the controversy had already subsided and the actual reviews of it were, in the main, reservedly positive across the political field. Those who had defended the project could make critical comments about the stiff acting and strange choices such as the tulip fields, whereas others, who had been against it, praised the colors and trick photography, or its entertainment value and spectacularity. All in all, the critics seem to have been reasonably unanimous in thinking that the film had not turned out to be the kind of disaster some had feared (Räisänen, 2003).

Sampo circulated Finnish cinemas with ten copies, which was a fairly normal amount. Despite all the fuss, its success was only mediocre, but viewer numbers were increased in following years by numerous school screenings. According to information in the Finnish National Filmography, one thousand copies were made for the massive Soviet market (Uusitalo, 1991), and in all likelihood the *Sampo* was also shown in parts of China (Räisänen, 2003).

In the United States *Sampo* underwent an interesting transformation. In 1964, it was shortened by about 20 minutes – some songs, for instance, were cut – and the director, producer and actors were all re-christened with more marketable names: Ptushko became Gregg Sebelious (the name seems to be a vague reference to Jean Sibelius), Orko became Julius Strandberg, and actors were billed as Jon Powers, Nina Anderson, and Peter Sorenson, to mention only a few. The film was dubbed in English and renamed *The Day the Earth Froze*, the poster promoting it with the sentences: "The most chilling terror ever experienced! Thousands against an ominous diabolical force from another world!" In the drawn poster a blond

hero and heroine recoil from a giant eye, and their costumes are styled to be associated more with a spaceship than with folklore. In other words, the *Sampo* received a totally new genre coupling for the U.S. market: it was adapted to the then popular science fiction and horror film genres, greatly in demand especially in the drive-in theatres favored by the youth.

Having circulated the drive-ins, *The Day the Earth Froze* followed a course typical to its newfound genre: it was shown as a fill-in program on television, apparently from a poor quality black and white copy. The film came to life again in a TV series from the early 1990s, *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. The frame narrative for the show presents an evil scientist attempting to brainwash the main character, who is forced to watch "the world's worst movies" with two robots. As the films play, the characters of the narrative are shown as silhouettes, speaking over the soundtrack, which in this case means that they will never find out what the mysterious "sampo" is, that everyone in the film is so interested in.

Mystery Science Theater 3000 has strongly divided opinion among movie enthusiasts: some find the concept hilarious, others feel that the joke fails to do justice even to those deliberately clumsy and self-parodying B-films that constitute the bulk of material in the series, let alone to "real" films like the *Sampo* that somehow came to be included. In any case, *MST3K* has finally guaranteed *Sampo* a kind of cult following: the reputation of the show has grown together with the spread of the Internet, and there exist a large number of fan sites dedicated to the series. Even a random search shows that *The Day the Earth Froze* is a favorite episode among many fans of the series. Probably the series has to some extent contributed to the current availability of the film's "original" American version on DVD.

Sampo may already have a potential cult reputation also in Finland. Where the newspaper critics rather unanimously reacted negatively to the film on its showing on television in 1979 – many remembering that compulsory viewing of *Sampo* had alienated school children from the *Kalevala* instead of generating interest – in the 1990's *Sampo* could be admired as camp humor (Räisänen, 2003). This turn probably owes as much to changes in cinematic taste and aesthetics and the *Kalevala* becoming more commonplace, as to upheavals in international politics, in other words, to the fact that *Sampo* no longer needs to be seen only as an official monument to the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between Finland and the Soviet Union.

From the *Kalevala* to *The Age of Iron*

The series of filmic interpretations of the *Kalevala* continued in 1971–1974 with Riitta Nelimarkka and Jaakko Seeck's six-part animation *The Legend of the Sampo*. As with the 1959 co-production, the main theme here was the Sampo as the horn of plenty, a provider of material good, the description of which was emphasized in the final episodes. According to the plot summary, the aim of the series was "to awaken children's interest toward the *Kalevala* and Finnish folk traditions by presenting the events of the *Kalevala* in a colourful and down-to-earth way" (Sammon Tarina, 2006). As the creators pointed out, the storyline in *The Legend of the Sampo* centered on the dispute over justice between the people of Kaleva and those of the North. Nelimarkka and Seeck continued with national themes in their later animations *Piispa Henrik ja Lalli* (Bishop Henry and Lalli, 1975) and *Seitsemän Veljestä* (The Seven Brothers, 1979).

There was interest in creating new interpretations of the *Kalevala* but opportunities for making a feature film based on it were virtually nonexistent after the crisis of the Finnish film industry at the beginning of the 1960s. It was a logical development that at the end of the 1970s the initiative was seized by the national television and radio broadcasting company YLE, which had a de facto monopoly over television. The result of their interest was the most extensive audio-visual interpretation of the *Kalevala* thus far, the four-part mini-series *Rauta-Aika* (The Age of Iron, 1982), written by Paavo Haavikko and directed by Kalle Holmberg. *Rauta-Aika* was not really based in the Finnish cinematic tradition, as this is something that Haavikko and Holmberg would most likely have not found interesting to comment on. Nothing suggests that the makers had the earlier *Sampo* film in mind – except perhaps in the sense that they, together with the production company, might have had a vision of creating the first completely national interpretation. Connections to literary, theatrical and operatic traditions were much stronger than those to film. In 1982, Holmberg said of his starting points:

My only method in making *Rauta-Aika* was to search. The *Kalevala* tradition is strong: composers, poets, scientists and artists have created their own visions of it, visions that have shaped our conceptions of the Kalevalaic world for well over a hundred years. If we had remained at the mercy of the interpretations by Gallen-Kallela, Sibelius, or Eino Leino, we would

simply have repeated the old. We had to get rid of the burden of traditions, but it was hard. How to see through them, how to strip away the myths and approach our own times. To see, to grasp humanity beyond frozen statues and myths (Holmberg, 1982).

Breaking with tradition had many levels: the experienced theater director used film, a medium in which the Kalevalaic tradition was weakest, and thus moving beyond "plaster images" was easier. An important distancing starting point was also in the script written by Paavo Haavikko, who made a break with tradition already with his language. Haavikko sought to find his own poetic expression, one that would appeal to the modern reader. The long poem was published in book form in 1982, the same year that the TV series premiered. The book begins with the motto: "Forget! Forget the *Kalevala*, its heroes, words, sayings, forget what you've heard of them, the images you've seen. Forget!" (Haavikko, 1982, p. 5).

Haavikko and Holmberg tried to "forget" tradition, but ultimately such erasure of memory is impossible. In fact, the phrase itself recognizes the relationship between past and present. On the other hand, even if the work could break with traditional Kalevalaic interpretations, it still inevitably remained tied to the many conventions of creating and performing art. This is evident from the fact that the makers of *Rauta-Aika* had a long history of working together. In his memoirs, Kalle Holmberg (1999) particularly emphasized the significance of their operatic background. The same group had produced Aulis Sallinen's opera *Ratsumies* (The Horseman) for the Savonlinna Opera Festival in 1975. Haavikko had written the libretto, Holmberg had directed the production, and Ensio Suominen had designed the sets. Sallinen was in turn hired to compose for *Rauta-Aika* and Ulf Söderblom conducted both productions. It can even be said that the opera productions had gained the group a cultural position and prestige that justified their tackling a work like the *Kalevala*. The budget was huge for the time and, in fact, the Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE has not produced as grandiose a TV series since. Preparation took a long time, and the project began already as early as the autumn of 1977. When the series was presented on television in the spring of 1982, the premiere was followed by what Holmberg remembers as "one and a half years of bawling and caterwauling" (1999, p. 268). When the Finnish Broadcasting Company, funded with tax revenues and license fees, invested in a laborious drama, and with some

of the country's most esteemed artists, a public debate erupted.

If the makers of *Rauta-Aika* had impressive credentials from their previous collaboration, also the cast brought interesting histories with them. Kalevi Kahra who played Väinö had received a Finnish Jussi Award for his role in the film *Täällä Pohjantähden alla* (Under the North Star, 1968). One of the most famous Finnish theater actors, Esko Salminen played the Master of the North, while Kristiina Halkola who at the same time was playing in the TV sketch series *Hukkaputki* played the Mistress. Film director Mikko Niskanen in turn makes a brief appearance as Tiera. The most unexpected choice of actor was undoubtedly Vesa-Matti Loiri, cast as Ilmari. At the time, Loiri was at the pinnacle of his stardom as the comic anti-hero Uno Turhapuro (Hietala, Honka-Hallila, & Kangasniemi, 1992, pp. 131–133). The seventh Turapuro movie, *Uno Turhapuro Menettää Muistinsa* (Uno Turhapuro Loses His Memory) premiering later in 1982, brought over half a million viewers to the silver screen. At the time, Pekka Laaksonen (1982) noticed the collision of high and low culture in his assessment of the reception received by *Rauta-Aika*. Especially the casting choices provoked comments in the letters to the editor sections:

Too familiar seemed the ancient characters of the Kalevalaic Iron Age. The Mistress of the North was the girl from Hukkaputki, Ilmari was Turhapuro, Tiera was Niskanen. Contributors were, however, mostly disturbed by the similarity between Loiri, Ilmari and Turhapuro: they kept expecting Ilmari to stumble over the doorstep to the forge and turn into Turhapuro (p. 105).

From today's vantage point it may be difficult to understand viewers' inability to perceive Loiri without associations with Turhapuro, but in 1982 the art field was polarized and Uno was the most iconic example of popular culture. For many, it was also a serious competitor to high culture because of its popularity.

The Battle Over Interpretation

The story world of *Rauta-Aika* revolves around the Sampo, worldly goods and the passions they arouse. Paradoxically, the first reactions to the series focused on money – not, however, on the commentary on contemporary greed that Holmberg and Haavikko had in mind in making the series – but on the assets that had been spent on forging this

audiovisual product, almost as if *Rauta-Aika* was itself seen as a Sampo, which brings more material wealth than it consumes.

Although Holmberg (1999) later remembered the comments on money as critique, as a nettling experience, which made him feel guilty about having “wasted” money, in the beginning such references to cost did not seem to be as negatively charged. Instead, the announcement of the huge amounts caused sensational interest in and curiosity toward the new production.

The actual debate did not begin until the end of March, after two episodes of *Rauta-Aika* had been shown. In his *Hufvudstadsbladet* column on March 19, 1982, Jörn Donner was surprised that *Rauta-Aika* had been publicly presented as an inexpensive production. The Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE had revealed a budget of 5.3 million marks, but had also noted that production had taken five years. According to Donner, the making of an ordinary feature film took 40 to 50 days of filming in 1982, costing over 2 million marks. Donner thus assumed that the total amount announced by YLE had not included personnel costs, administration, fixed costs or equipment costs, since the company had used its own personnel and equipment. Were all the actual costs included, the total amount would, so Donner claimed, have come to almost six times what YLE had stated. Having had this opportunity to express his views, Donner added his hope that viewers in other countries would be spared “this parody of our history, in which the placing of famous faces in barren nature is expected to furnish content and meaning to Haavikko's text” (*Aamulehti*, 1982a, p. 15).

Rauta-Aika was accompanied by an aura of sensationalism. Viewers knew to expect a spectacle on which time and effort had been spent. The issue of expenses added to the sensationality just at the point when half the episodes had not yet been seen. The first episode was shown on the Finnish Kalevala Day and the second a week later. These two parts were closely related and culminated in the forging of the Sampo. This was followed by a three-week break, during which the debate about money became the number one topic in the press – as if the completion of the Sampo in the sections just seen had focused debate on material wealth. The press eagerly took up the reference offered by the *Kalevala*: the *Helsingin Sanomat* called *Rauta-Aika* a “money-destroying machine” (Koljonen, 1982, p. 15). After the break the last two episodes were shown, the story of Lemminki, and the final episode with its

Felliniesque wedding scene and feast celebrating the hunted bear.

External features were emphasized in the reception of *Rauta-Aika*, but its content was also an object of controversy. Challenging and opposing views were publicly presented, in critiques and in letters to the editors. Airing *Rauta-Aika* in parts added significantly to the complexity of the reception. Advance news releases raised expectations before the first two episodes, which then caused some confusion. This was followed by a break during which the latter episodes were still being completed. During the break, the Otava Publishing Company also released Paavo Haavikko's poem, the emphasis of which was somewhat at odds with Holmberg's still unfinished miniseries. This provided an opportunity to compare the already viewed episodes with the poetic work that the series was based on. At the same time it gave an opportunity to speculate on where the whole was going.

An important theme running through the interpretations of *Rauta-Aika* involved the relationship of historical to mythical time. The same question had also been debated with respect to the film *Sampo*, in which the conflict was between the Finnish tradition of folkloristic interpretation of the *Kalevala* and the Soviet fairy tale film. In the case of *Rauta-Aika* the name itself referred to the conflict: it was not the *Kalevala* but the *Age of Iron*. The name also contained a conceptual distinction. *Rauta-Aika* ("the age of iron") does not refer to a historical epoch, as does "rautakausi" ("the iron age"). This distinction was also upheld in the English name for the series – *The Age of Iron* not *The Iron Age*. Holmberg noted that the name is a move from history toward poetry and myth:

The Age of Iron is timeless, even if it is described with material from history, from myth. Loosely, the events of the film are set in the time before the first crusade. The only historical point of reference in the film is the raid on Sigtuna by the Finns in 1187. Everything else about that merciless, brutal, hard time needs to be imagined, or to be listened for in poems (Holmberg, 1982).

The set designer Ensio Suominen described *Rauta-Aika* as a film about the elements of nature, "not so much about light and sunshine as about the mist, the rain, the cold, and the cutting wind" (Sundström, 1982, p. 3).

The originality of *Rauta-Aika* was the

outcome of a deliberate attempt to end an interpretive tradition relating not only to the *Kalevala* but also to the Finnish ancient past more generally, a tradition that both researchers and artists had followed since the nineteenth century (Fewster, 2006). Hence the critique was not only directed at the Finnish mythological tradition but also at historical interpretation. Before the premiere, Holmberg said: "If we had left the *Kalevala* to scientists, poetry would be dead" (Sundström, 1982, p. 3). Undoubtedly *Sampo* also sought to be poetic, but at the same time it contained elements from scientific and artistic interpretations of the *Kalevala*, and referred, inter alia, to Gallen-Kallela's canonized *Kalevala* imagery.

In letters to the editors, *Rauta-Aika* received criticism from both sides, however. In the *Helsingin Sanomat*, the pen-name "Shall I become an artist too?" (1982, p. 15) stated that although the costume designers had sought inspiration in the National Museum's collections, they had created their own costume fantasy. The writer also commented on the series' relationship to history: "When we compare the resources spent in this country on the kind of basic research that could help in creating a meaningful and interesting *Age of Iron*, it's hard to know whether to laugh or to cry." At the same time, the series was criticized for wrecking national myths. In the *Helsingin Sanomat*, H. Rautio (1982, p. 17) from Imatra lamented that Väinämöinen had been turned into a knife-wielding bully, Ilmarinen into a beardless forger, and Lemminkäinen into an insignificant swordsman, ending with the question: "Is it in our nation's interest that a film disparaging our ancient culture is shown outside the country's borders?" Marja Paavolainen (1982) also drew attention to Väinö's violence. She pointed out how Paavo Haavikko had become disillusioned with the "power of words and song" and turned Väinö into a "knife fighter." Paavolainen also wondered why those parts of the *Kalevala* that defended peace – and the might of the word – had been turned upside down. Her interpretation was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that *Rauta-Aika* was completed at a time when the peace movement was gaining momentum again. On the other hand, the confusion also highlights the symbolic significance of the *Kalevala*. Although the makers urged their audience to forget the *Kalevala*, forgetting was impossible.

Where the TV series stirred up emotions, Paavo Haavikko's literary work *Rauta-Aika* received unqualifiedly positive reviews. The work was hard to classify, however. It was called a

“poem” and an “epic” (Tervo, 1982, p. 11), and even a “novel, which blends narrative, drama, and poetry” (Huotari, 1982, p. 11). The text emphasized timeless themes, the relationship between a man and a woman, love, and death. Haavikko’s *Rauta-Aika* was a human epic, a portrayal of human emotions and aspirations, even though it presented an apparently distant world, situated on the border of history and myth. A world created not by gods but by humans.

Of the reviewers, Pekka Tarkka paid most attention to the book’s historicity. One of its central themes was the poet’s own position, his historical role. Although Haavikko – and also the TV series – asked readers and viewers to forget the *Kalevala*, the author assumed the position occupied by Lönnrot, at least in the sense that the work’s predecessor, the nineteenth-century *Kalevala*, was specifically Lönnrot’s creation. The starting point was the work of the prior poet. According to Tarkka (1982), Haavikko followed the path taken by Lönnrot to a surprising extent, especially with regard to the characters and plot structure. In fact, the folk poems Lönnrot used as raw material offer a myriad of narrative opportunities.

A second historical dimension that Pekka Tarkka brought up in his review involved Haavikko’s interpretation of the Sampo. In his collection of poems *Kaksikymmentä ja yksi* (Twenty and one), Haavikko had already presented the idea that the Sampo was a counterfeiting shop, a coin-minting machine (Tarkka, 1982). Even though both Haavikko and Holmberg emphasized artistic integrity over historical narrative, *Rauta-Aika* brought historical interpretation to the *Kalevala* just as *Sampo* had. The end of the Iron Age, the time before the first crusade, marked a shift towards a monetary economy, even if the change was slow. When compared to the movie *Sampo*, the interpretation was materialistic and, in fact, historical – even if the creators of *Rauta-Aika* stressed the “timelessness” of the theme. In *Rauta-Aika* the Sampo is first of all a machine. In the 1959 interpretation, the Sampo still remains in part a more abstract, idealized concept: even though it is destroyed, Ptushko emphasizes optimism because the idea of the Sampo lives on as the pursuit of happiness.

Rauta-Aika as Monument

As noted above, the production of the TV series drew wide public attention, and epithets emphasizing its nature as spectacle appeared. People spoke of a gigantic production and of a magnum opus, “a feast of imagery” (*Hufvudstadsbladet*, 1982, p. 6). *Rauta-Aika* was

intended to be not just a TV drama but also a monument, an interpretation of the *Kalevala* for that generation, and a project unlike any the Finnish Broadcasting Company would again undertake. In a critique in *Karjalainen*, Seppo Knuutila (quoted in Laaksonen, 1982, p. 111) wrote that “this monument to new views” could only be built “on the ruins of previous images.” The work certainly became a monument, at least from the perspective of Finnish television history: at the same time it also sealed the end of the Finnish Broadcasting Company’s monopoly. It was soon after this that the gradual fragmentation and decentralization of television culture began.

The image of monumentality agreed particularly well with the *Kalevala* theme. After all, the epic poem published by Elias Lönnrot had in its time been intended as a landmark and milestone of Finnish culture. This is one of the paradoxes of *Rauta-Aika*. Although it was critical of the Kalevalaic heritage, it continued the tradition by offering the contemporary viewer an epic in monumental form. Against this backdrop, the controversy concerning money that the series generated is not a sideline but instead relates essentially to the theme. The result, however, remained incomplete. Sakari Räsänen wrote of Kalle Holmberg’s feelings in the *Helsingin Sanomat* on March 14, 1982:

He feels that he will not have received final feedback on *Rauta-Aika* until it has been reviewed as a single, coherent movie. When it has grown out from television to the wide screen, receiving the status of an independent movie (p. 21).

In keeping with this statement, it was natural to think that *Rauta-Aika* would grow into a lasting cinematic monument and find its “rightful” place on the silver screen. Many of the reviews also expressed the hope that the work would be converted into a cinema copy that would do it justice technically.

The issue of monumentality also relates to the issue of the stylistic devices employed. In his review of Haavikko’s published text, Pekka Tarkka drew attention to the Homeric lingering of the book. The slow unfolding of the story or the outright repetition also brings to mind the monumentality of the makers’ earlier work, the opera. The forging of the Sampo is a dramatic high point in the same way as the forging of the sword in Richard Wagner’s opera *Siegfried*. Holmberg, Haavikko, Sallinen and Suominen had joined forces at the Savonlinna Opera Festival, and the

means of exaggeration and stylization of the opera have left their mark on *Rauta-Aika*: its laconic dialogue would be well suited to song.

Ensio Suominen's impressive set design also made an important contribution to *Rauta-Aika*'s monumentality. Suominen's work garnered praise in reviews, even though at times the laborious staging solutions tended to draw too much of the viewer's attention, as Jukka Kajava (1982) noted. Immediately after the TV series was shown, Suominen's work was exhibited at the Tampere Art Museum. The main exhibits were Lemminki's smoke-hut and the boat Väinö built for the Maid of the North (*Aamulehti*, 1982b, p. 15). Particular attention was given, however, to the villages, Pohjola (Northland) and Kalevala, which he had designed. The village of Kalevala was constructed on the shores of the Koitere, in Iломantsi's Siitavuori, Pohjola in Pinsiö, Hämeenkyrö. Soon after the filming ended, Kalevala had to be torn down because the Finnish Broadcasting Company's lease expired and the municipality of Iломantsi saw no reason to take care of the village. By contrast, Pohjola evoked high expectations. And it received the most praise for its design. In the *Aamulehti*, Erkkä Lehtola wrote: "Set on a wild hilltop, Pohjola is a tribute to hard work and great skill, a monument to the toil of set designer Ensio Suominen – a museum" (1982, p. 10).

The reception of *Rauta-Aika* was supplemented by an interesting historical-cultural venture aiming for the preservation of Pohjola. While the intention was clearly to turn it into a monument to Ensio Suominen, there were undoubtedly also sentiments to the effect that the work of the famed set designer had captured something essential about medieval life in Finland. The Pinsiö Hunting Club took charge of the venture, hoping to lease the land from its owner, the city of Nokia, and turn the village into a tourist attraction. Suominen had nothing against this: "For me, the important thing is that the place is not misused. I don't want American filmmakers any more than the people from MTV (the Finnish Commercial Broadcasting Company) there with their cameras, playing it up as exotic" (Tuomi, 1982, p. 10).

Pohjola was located on the Seinävuori hill in Pinsiö; at the top rose a high tower, visible over the stockade. At the foot of the mountain stood Ilmari's smithy where the Sampo – in the fictional world of *Rauta-Aika* – was forged. Rauno Antinmaa, the chairman of the hunting club, stated that the goal was to build a hunting lodge and a sauna beside Pohjola, "in a matching style." There

had also been discussion about building a smoke-sauna in the tower. A road leading to the site had been repaired for shooting the film. The aim was that the gates of Pohjola would open for the public – "interested in the Finnish past" – in the summer of 1983 (*Turun Sanomat*, 1982, p. 1).

The landscape of *Rauta-Aika* was associated with an aura of "the Finnish past" and visitors to the Pohjola theme park could empathize not only with the events of the remembered TV series but also with the harsh and barren world in which Finns were thought to have lived centuries before. The Pinsiö Hunting Club's idea of adventure tourism and a theme park was ahead of its time. It was also a museal addition to *Rauta-Aika*'s monumentality; an attempt to let the fiction live on even after the series had ended on television. The impression left by *Rauta-Aika* was not sufficient to carry the idea forward, however. In part this may have resulted from the fact that the series could not be shown again right away because of the high rerun fees (*Aamulehti*, 1982c, p. 15). *Rauta-Aika* did not get the chance to forge a path into the nation's memory.

Conclusion

Rauta-Aika's creators urged the audience to forget the *Kalevala*, perhaps themselves aware of the impossibility of doing so. *Sampo* did not attempt quite as radical a break: there was no desire to forget the *Kalevala* as such, only its traditional interpretations. The epic was not experienced as a unified work "created by the people," but as a collage of various elements from folk poetry created for nineteenth-century needs, and thus open to creative reworking. Even the introduction of "foreign" fairy tale and fantasy materials was accepted, although somewhat reluctantly at first.

In seeking to distance itself from the *Kalevala*, *Rauta-Aika* consciously tried to speak to a contemporary audience. The fairy tale and fantasy features of *Sampo* do not as obviously lead one's thoughts to the present moment; instead *Sampo* can be seen to emphasize the continuing presence of the past. The movie begins at the statue of Lönnrot and Väinämöinen, in the bustle of contemporary Helsinki and then imperceptibly shifts to describe the Kalevalaic past. In this way, it suggests that there is an unbroken link between the past – of both Lönnrot and the *Kalevala* – and the present. The statue also reminds us of the monumentalization of Finnish culture. Like *Rauta-Aika*, *Sampo* was monumental in its proportions as well as in its attempt to become a new, large-scale interpretation of the epic, albeit realized on terms of the present, a necessary continuation of

Lönnrot's work, the monumentality of which had served the needs of national awakening. Now the needs were seen to be different.

Both reinterpretations sought to distance themselves from the more nationally isolated interpretations of the Kalevala tradition. In *Sampo*, this distanciation was visible at all levels from the production process to the film's style. The joint production with the Soviets resembled Finnish foreign policy of the time in miniature: continuous negotiations, stubbornness, concessions, compromises, successes and failures, and behind-the-scenes controversy alongside public friendship. In terms of style and story elements, the institutionally established Finnish tradition of *Kalevala* interpretation combined with the Russian fairy tale tradition and supranational special effects cinema, to the extent, in fact, that *Sampo* was brought back to life on the other side of the Atlantic. *Rauta-Aika*, on the other hand, aimed at a materialistic reinterpretation from a monetary perspective. From a production standpoint, it "belonged" to the Finnish Broadcasting Company but at the same time it was modeled on the quality productions of other European public broadcasters. In terms of expression, it combined Haavikko's minimalist poetic language and the monumentality of opera with features of the European art film, such as deliberately lingering storytelling, significant looks, talking to the camera, and the mixing of natural and symbolic elements.

Despite their differences, *Sampo* and *Rauta-Aika* focus on the same problem, the interpretation of the epic through changing audiovisual narrative means. The filmmakers were also fascinated by the same theme: the Sampo, the wondrous Kalevalaic miracle machine, with its "lid in many colors," that Ilmarinen forged as a gift to the Mistress of the North for his engagement to her daughter. Perhaps the change from the *Sampo* to *Rauta-Aika* can be seen in terms of a change in the values of material culture. Where the destroyed horn of plenty is left to live on in the minds of the people of Kaleva in *Sampo*, the machine only mints counterfeit coins in *Rauta-Aika*. The Sampo will never be able to produce true wealth or to change life for the better.

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