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feature article

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# Cinematic worlding: Animating Karelia in *Santra* and the Talking Trees

## ABSTRACT

1. *In the Finnish short documentary Santra ja puhuvat puut (Santra and the Talking*
2. *Trees) (2013), the director Miia Tervo travels to Russian Karelia in search of her*
3. *roots in the cradle of Finno-Ugrian mythology and culture. She finds rune singer*
4. *Santra Remsujeva and a sense of home that she has longed for. I suggest that Tervo*
5. *uses film-making as a means to ‘take root’ by connecting with the mythical world*
6. *of Karelia through a playful aesthetic that engages all the senses. The documentary*
7. *weaves together the director/narrator’s intimate voice-over, observational scenes,*
8. *animations with traditional cultural motifs, and old ethnographic and archival foot-*
9. *age in a process of ‘cinematic worlding’. The cinematic rhythms and animated traces*
10. *of the past create a sensory experience of Karelia – a nearly extinct culture that*
11. *Tervo revitalizes in an effort to find her place in the world.*

## CINEMATIC WORLDING: ANIMATING KARELIA IN SANTRA AND THE TALKING TREES

17. *Santra ja puhuvat puut (Santra and the Talking Trees) (Tervo, 2013) begins with*
18. *a vibrant montage of images and sounds. Snowflakes swirl in the wind while*

## KEYWORDS

worlding  
Karelia  
sensory experience  
archival footage  
animation

1. As Tervo calls Santra her 'surrogate grandmother' in the film, it would feel inappropriate to refer to her as Remsujeva.

a few harp notes reverberate in the air. In voice-over, the director, Miia Tervo, describes her restlessness, the need to escape, and the feeling of not belonging anywhere. In a sepia-coloured archival clip, an old boat glides across a lake. The wind starts to blow and the soft, hollow tones of a handpan (a metallic drum) echo in the film space. The camera captures snowy forests through the window of a moving car. A young woman jogs along grey city streets.

In this poetic short documentary, impressions of the past, introspective moments and macro-cultural themes intermingle. Laura Marks might call it 'hybrid cinema', as the film mixes traits of fiction and documentary (2000: 8). *Santra and the Talking Trees* follows the director's exploration of Karelian culture and the encounter she has with the charismatic rune singer Santra Remsujeva. Making the film serves as a form of self-enquiry for the director while she intends to 'grow roots' by engaging with and exploring a mythical past. In the intricately woven audio-visual tapestry outbursts of sounds, images and dialogue form streams of moods and rhythms exuding longing, but also lightness, joy and a sense of discovery. Tervo filmed the 27-minute documentary over a period of six years, visiting Santra several times.<sup>1</sup> Overall, she shot around 300 hours of material (DocPoint Festival 2014).

The whimsical montage of diverse visuals – from old ethnographic films, travel videos, animations, television programmes and old commercials to observational footage, along with a rich aural backdrop, evoke connections that 'speak' in ways that cannot easily be put into words. The sourced audio-visual materials are not contextualized, but connected freely to other images, sounds and music. Through the associative montage, Tervo creates a film world that challenges the boundaries between the self and the other, the past and the present, the mythical and the 'real', the inside and the outside.

The unruly film world of *Santra and the Talking Trees* animates Karelia as a place to dwell in with all the senses. This is particularly evident in the animation scenes, created by Ami Lindholm, where objects, symbols and ornaments related to Karelian tradition begin to move to the rhythm of the music as if they were living things. The film-making process is a means to 'attend to the world [...] of social and ecological relations' for Tervo; it is a 'cosmomorphic' practice (Ivakhiv 2013a: viii–ix). Thus cinematic worlding appears in two intertwined aspects in this article: it is understood as a creative process that the film-maker expresses through her work, as well as the aesthetic dynamics within the film, such as rhythm or trace.

Although the ties to the ancient Finnish Karelian culture as a living tradition are almost broken, they can be animated through artistic works such as *Santra and the Talking Trees*. In the film, Finnish-Karelian culture is presented as a 'home' towards which Tervo gravitates in her journey to find a place in the world. As she says in the film: 'I guess I was desperately trying to cling to Santra so she could teach me who I was and where I came from, the roots and the past, and what the wind is, and all the customs, and how to knit mittens and bake. And what happens when you die'. Tervo narrates how she felt disconnected from her roots but starts to 'remember' after spending time with Santra. From this word choice a question arises: how can you remember something you have never experienced yourself? The process Tervo goes through in the film appears to be about reviving traces of a collective past and a cultural memory we carry in our bodies, a memory that is there even when we are not aware of it.

Tervo's documentary revives a connection with the world through sensory engagement. Drawing from Walter Benjamin's writings, Inga Pollmann

1. describes cinematic worlding as a process related to the capacity of film to  
 2. create worlds, or environments (*Umwelten*), within our world(s), making use  
 3. of all the senses (Pollmann 2013: 782–83). Cinema can also be a tool (or a  
 4. toy) with which people can reclaim an estranged world as their own, while in  
 5. film the world reveals itself to the spectator as a playground, an open field of  
 6. action (Pollman 2013: 808–09). Through playful engagement with the world,  
 7. *Santra and the Talking Trees* evolves from a subjective documentary, ‘cinema of  
 8. me’, into a ‘cinema of me in the world’, where the past and its mythological  
 9. underpinnings become tangible.

### 11. THE ALLURE OF KARELIA

13. The landscapes of lakes and forests and other elements of nature appear  
 14. frequently in *Santra and the Talking Trees*, thereby invoking familiar and  
 15. even nationalistic motifs associated with archetypal Finnish imagery.<sup>2</sup> In one  
 16. montage sequence, pieces of moss, leaves and tree roots float in all direc-  
 17. tions. Next, in a grainy and warmly tinted archival clip, softly contoured lake  
 18. scenery opens up from a hill. Birds are singing and a burning barn appears  
 19. in a black-and-white scene. This landscape imagery is closely linked to the  
 20. Finnish cultural imagination and the idea of an idyllic and simple life in the  
 21. countryside before urbanization began. Images from an old ethnographic film  
 22. are introduced for the first time as Karelian women perform a spell. A crack-  
 23. ling noise resembling interference on a broadcast signal, as if hinting that the  
 24. film is attempting to establish a connection with this past culture, as Tervo  
 25. longs to do.<sup>3</sup>

26. Tervo talks in a confessional tone about envying trees for their roots and  
 27. feeling homeless in the world. She recounts how her family was broken in  
 28. many ways (while a bottle of vodka rolls over in a clay animation) and how,  
 29. after leaving home, she travelled extensively around the world, as if ‘living in  
 30. the wind’. Her mother’s family past in the ‘so very beautiful Karelia’ fascinates  
 31. her: ‘Mom always says we are from a land where people sing all the time, but  
 32. we lost that land to Russia in the war and it doesn’t exist anymore. So do I  
 33. then come from nowhere?’

34. Most of the geographic region of Finnish Karelia was indeed ceded to the  
 35. Soviet Union after World War II.<sup>4</sup> Yet Karelia lives its own life in the Finnish  
 36. imagination. It is often remembered in contemporary culture in an idealized  
 37. way, characterized by nostalgia and sorrow that evacuees and others who  
 38. are part of the war generation felt after its loss (see Fingerroos 2008).<sup>5</sup> While  
 39. hopes of retrieving the area have slowly died during the last decades, Karelia  
 40. has become a dreamland like no other.

41. In collective memory, Finnish Karelia lives on as myth: it is considered  
 42. the cradle of an ancient, lost culture. The mythic qualities given to Karelia in  
 43. Finnish cultural memory derive to a large extent from the national epic *Kalevala*  
 44. (1835, 1849), collected and edited by folklorist Elias Lönnrot. It consists mostly  
 45. of Karelian poems, songs, spells and stories that have been passed from one  
 46. generation to the next in oral tradition.<sup>6</sup> The mythological epic gave inspira-  
 47. tion to national romanticism, which incited the nationalist movement’s politi-  
 48. cal rise in Finland during the nineteenth century. Karelia was also the place  
 49. where many painters, composers, authors, poets, researchers and folklore  
 50. enthusiasts travelled in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when  
 51. they wanted to get in touch with Finnish culture’s essence, as Karelia was  
 52. the place where Finnish heritage was thought to exist in its ‘purest’ and most

2. See Heinänen et al. (2011) for more on constructing ‘Finnishness’ in landscapes through images and art.

3. It should be noted, that the components of ‘Karelian tradition’ are diversified. The Karelian region is spread over two countries, Finland and Russia, but Karelian culture has always been transcultural in nature, sharing traits with Russian, Finnish and other Finnic groups such as the Veps, Ingrians or Izhorians living mostly in Russia, Finland and Estonia, as well as with other Finnish regional cultures. Until the Russian revolution in 1917, the border remained rather porous and people could move freely between the Grand Duchy of Finland and Russia.

4. Before, during and after the Winter War (1939–40) and the Continuation War (1941–44) between the Soviet Union and Finland, around 450,000 Finnish Karelians were evacuated from their homes to other parts of Finland, first to escape the battles; after the wars, the vast majority of them moved permanently to the Finnish side of the new border, leaving 24,700 km<sup>2</sup> (around one tenth of Finnish soil) to the Soviet Union, as agreed in the Moscow Armistice. During her life, Remsujeva escaped twice from her home, situated in Russian territory. The first time she migrated to the Finnish side of the border during the 1920s’ so-called ‘Kinship wars’ in Karelia, when Finnish volunteer troops supported the Karelians in their fight against the Russian Bolsheviks. The second time was during the

Continuation War when she moved to Arkhangelsk, Russia, while Vuokkiniemi was occupied by Finland. After the wars, Remsujeva returned home, where she lived until her death in 2010 (Nieminen 2011).

5. I also live very much entangled with this longing for Karelian tradition, as my great-grandmother was Karelian and her presence is still strong on my mother's side of the family – the memory of Karelia as a place, the singing and the stories and laughter have not disappeared although several generations after her have been born in other parts of Finland. The older I become, the more I feel the pull of nostalgia and the appeal of all things Karelian.
6. *The Kalevala* still enjoys an authoritative place as a representative of Karelian culture, although research has shown that especially the second and more widely known edition – 'the new Kalevala', published in 1849 – is to a great extent Lönnrot's creation and not a 'faithful' documentation of Karelian tradition (e.g. Saarelainen 2014). Lönnrot took many liberties while composing the epic, inventing and rewriting so that the poems would better fit the grand mythical narrative.
7. The fact that the old oral knowledge and runes have survived best in Karelia, especially in White Karelia, is thought to have resulted from the late arrival of reading and writing skills in the region. For the remote location of the 'rune villages', literacy

'original' form.<sup>7</sup> This cultural movement was later called Karelianism. Even today there is a belief that ancient wisdom and the oldest form of Finnish culture originate from Karelia. It is located somewhere between the familiar and the strange in the Finnish imagination, as Tervo's film also conveys. It is where talking trees still exist.

The first thing Tervo does after arriving in Karelia is to visit a tree, and not just any tree, but the largest birch in the Fennoscandia region. It was easy to recognize from afar, says Tervo, 'as it shone so brightly' among the other trees. From this tree, wise men and women in ancient times went to seek powers. Tervo talks about pressing herself against the tree, which then whispered to her: 'It will come ... It will come'. This scene reveals how multiple elements in the film – the objects, stories, sounds, glances and spaces – give a sensation of Karelia as an enigmatic but still tangible place.<sup>8</sup>

Folklorist Markku Nieminen (introduced simply as 'Markku' in the film) brings Tervo to Santra Remsujeva's home in Vuokkiniemi, located on the Russian side of White Karelia (Vienan Karjala), about 30 kilometres from the Finnish border. In *White Karelia*, rune singing was still a vibrant part of everyday life when Lönnrot came to collect material for the *Kalevala*. Santra, who was around 90 years old at the time of filming, performs her rollicking and, sometimes, sexually loaded runes and recites spells to the camera, but also does so in the middle of everyday activities, while knitting, resting and spending time with family and friends. This illustrates the way folklore is deeply connected to a person's way of being in the world (Nieminen 2011; Mononen 2014b).

The runes, or 'poem songs', are part of Finnish folklore tradition. They cover all aspects of social life, including important events such as births or deaths, mythical stories about the world and its origins, magical beliefs and spells, relations with nature and animals and traditional healing methods.

In recent years, Karelia has re-emerged in several Finnish documentaries as the ultimate place of belonging. In the animated *Kalevala 2.0 (The Story of My Tribe)* (Ljokkoi, 2013), young descendants of Karelian immigrants share their inherited memories of Karelia. *Laulu (The Song)* (Vilhunen, 2014) depicts an encounter between Finland's last Karelian rune singer Jussi Huovinen and his pupil Hanneriina Moisseinen. Director Selma Vilhunen describes in an interview how during the filming process she started to think of film as a 'soundboard' that people can inhabit while listening to the world and to



Image 1: Santra singing for the camera. The poetic songs convey a world view where human life is deeply entangled with nature, animals and the magical sphere. Frame enlargement from the film, courtesy of For Real Productions.

1. themselves (Mononen 2014b). Moisseinen's quote from *The Song* illustrates  
 2. rather well the sentiment of our times, present also in Tervo's film: 'I have  
 3. been travelling for so long that I now need a place where I can sing. A home  
 4. where the songs can come out'.  
 5.

### 6. **'ME IN THE WORLD' DOCUMENTARY**

7. In today's hyper-connected world people can, in principle at least, choose  
 8. where they want to belong (e.g. Beck 2006). With freedom, however, may  
 9. come the agony of feeling out of sync with and lost within the world. For  
 10. bell hooks, belonging is related to a sense of direction and search for a place  
 11. with a 'sense of homecoming'. Leaning on the past is a resource and founda-  
 12. tion from which we can begin to 'renew our commitment to the present'  
 13. (hooks 2009: 1–2, 5). Tervo reflects in the film on how she kept travelling  
 14. because she did not know herself and always longed to be in some other  
 15. place and even in some other time. As she states in an interview: 'People  
 16. need something stable and firm [in their lives]; they need a past, a proper  
 17. history. When everybody is constantly trying to stay attuned to the times,  
 18. it makes you feel existentially insecure and unsafe' (Mononen 2014a).  
 19. Following parallel lines, Laura Rascaroli argues that the subjectivity boom in  
 20. non-fiction film-making reflects the fragmentation of the human experience  
 21. in the globalized world, our need to cope with it and find unity in a life that  
 22. feels disjointed (2009: 4–5).  
 23.

24. While first-person film, or the 'cinema of me', as Alisa Lebow calls it,  
 25. includes a range of practices, techniques and temporalities, they all share  
 26. two central features: subjectivity and relationality (2012: 1; 2008: xi). They  
 27. construct the subject as 'always already in-relation' in the 'first person plural',  
 28. and through these films it is possible to 'imagine multiple models of subjectiv-  
 29. ity itself' (Lebow 2008: xi–xii, 2012: 4). In first-person films, a relation can be  
 30. formed with the film-maker's own family, culture, nation or any other entity –  
 31. even with the planet as a whole.

32. The first-person documentary has become a favoured genre in Finnish  
 33. documentary film since the 1990s. During the past decade, the genre has  
 34. acquired interesting nuances. In 1989, Michael Renov wrote about the 'new  
 35. autobiography' in film and video as a practice that constructs subjectivity as  
 36. 'a site of instability' where coherence is abandoned and the self is in 'flux,  
 37. drift, perpetual revision' ([1989] 2004: 110). Although the notion of the frag-  
 38. mented self has not disappeared from the New Wave of first-person docu-  
 39. mentaries, film-makers seem to have turned their attention more towards  
 40. the self's place in the world. Ecological concerns, such as climate change and  
 41. critiques of consumer culture, are now strongly present in the most intro-  
 42. spective of documentary genres, as for example Petri Luukkainen's perform-  
 43. ative documentary *Tavarataivas (My Stuff)* (2013) demonstrates. In the film  
 44. Luukkainen renounces all his possessions in order to think through what  
 45. he really needs in life. Film-makers also build idiosyncratic connections  
 46. between the self and the world with compilations of archival footage, images  
 47. and stories, as Maija Blåfield does in her short film *Kulta-aika (Golden Age)*  
 48. (2014), edited out of footage the director captured all over the world over  
 49. fifteen years. The themes of cosmopolitanism, diaspora, global responsibility,  
 50. ecological sustainability and belonging are central to these kinds of subjective  
 51. yet worldly documentaries, which could be called the 'cinema of me in the  
 52. world'.

became more common  
only in the 1920s.

8. I use 'sense' here in all its meanings, as sensory and bodily experience, as well as a meaning-making process described with words and concepts.

9. In some aspects, Tervo's work resembles Guy Maddin's autobiographical 'docu-fantasia' *My Winnipeg* (2007), which merges 'personal history, civic tragedy, and mystical hypothesizing' with dramatized scenes, archival footage and home videos (2009).

In *Santra and the Talking Trees*, Tervo's way of conversing with the world and the past are also tinted with magical elements that suggest a connection to another kind of reality. The use of magical realism in the film, as defined by Karen Pearlman et al., blurs the boundaries between two realities, the 'real' and the 'magical', in the same film world without the author discounting the surreal elements in any way (2010: s.l.). In the film, a life out of balance – Tervo's experience of detachment from the world – is transformed through fantastic elements summoned in animations, extra-diegetic sounds and offbeat editing that connect her story to the magical and mythical world and, in the end, Tervo as the 'heroine' of this saga of metamorphosis finds a greater truth as she starts her own family (in which Santra's spells had a part to play, we are led to believe).

According to Karen Armstrong, at the core of mythmaking is imagination: a belief that the visible, material world is not the only reality (Armstrong 2005: 2, 4). In *Santra and the Talking Trees*, the coexistence of the material and the 'hidden' world is implied by means of nostalgia, which seeps into the imagery, pushing the viewer further away from the everyday, rational world where myths are discredited (Pearlman et al. 2010). This adds a fantastic dimension to Tervo's 'me in the world' documentary, layering another world inside the film world.<sup>9</sup> In this multi-layered process of cinematic worlding the boundaries between different worlds become blurred and the film world opens up as a 'playground' where magical powers can also reside (see Pollmann 2013: 814).

The director's other award-winning works that blend animations, dramatized scenes, archival and documentary material also feature the same kind of playfulness. The autobiographical *Hylje (The Seal)* (2005) is an elliptical story from Tervos's own life, told in bits and pieces with the help of an animated small plastic seal. In *Lumikko (The Little Snow Animal)* (2009), Tervo overlaps rather gloomy discussions between a young girl and a radio psychologist with expressive animations and highly structured, dramatized scenes of a teenage girl alone at home drinking beer with dried roses all around her and in a disco, dancing to Haddaway's 1990s hit song 'What is Love'. Her documentaries as well as fiction work, such as the recent *Pieniä kömpelöitä hellyydenosoituksia (Clumsy Little Acts of Tenderness)* (2015), often rely on quirky encounters and sudden turns.

### IMAGINING NEARBY

A film-maker can inscribe himself or herself into a documentary in countless ways on three levels, writes Catherine Russell: as first-person voice-over – that is, 'the speaker' of the film; as origin of the gaze – 'the seer'; or as body image – 'the seen' (Russell 1999: 277). The self in *Santra and the Talking Trees* is clearly the director Tervo, who is present as the 'I' of the voice-over. Although she appears as a body image only in the latter part of the film (except for a short glimpse in the opening sequence as a young woman on a street), her personal narrative articulated in the voice-over forms the main dramatic arc and supports Tervo's role as the speaker of the film. Tervo's role as the origin of the gaze – the seer – is more vague due to the diversity of the material used in the film. Moreover, it is not always clear who is filming in the observational scenes (three other camera operators besides Tervo are credited in the end titles).

The self and the world intermingle on many levels in the film, but this occurs most prominently in the cutting and the layering created in the editing

1. process. The montages convey Tervo's way of seeing where she appears as  
 2. the 'seer', but they also materialize her wish to 'remember' her place in the  
 3. world *with* the cornucopia of images and sounds. Tervo envisions an emerg-  
 4. ing 'language' in which to think about Karelia as a home in the world, work-  
 5. ing at the limits of thought by referring to memory in images, objects, bodies,  
 6. sounds and senses (see Marks 2000: 29).

7. For Tervo, Santra is the agent of the 'original home' that she wishes to  
 8. cherish. Yet we learn almost nothing about Santra's past or current situa-  
 9. tion in life, as the film does not speak of her, only nearby her (borrowing  
 10. the expression of Trinh 1992: 96). Although Santra performs almost all of her  
 11. songs and spells directly at the camera, no apparent interviews are included  
 12. in the film. In observational scenes, she is often filmed with her granddaugh-  
 13. ter in the same frame and with warmly tinted filters, which add an aura of  
 14. nostalgia to the images of everyday situations, distancing them from realistic  
 15. settings.

16. From the other side of the room, we see Santra embracing her grand-  
 17. daughter on the couch and speaking to her tenderly. Santra is often filmed in  
 18. tight frames, but also from afar, sometimes even in shadows or from behind,  
 19. as if 'peeking' at her, while objects, pieces of furniture and other obstacles  
 20. stand between her and the camera. She is embedded in her world, only  
 21. glimpsed from a distance. In close-ups we see Santra's hands knitting, her  
 22. feet in felt boots and a kitten trying to jump onto her lap. Santra's exuberant  
 23. presence is conveyed through her bodily existence, her everyday actions, her  
 24. voice.

25. These choices of framing and warm filters could be interpreted as Tervo's  
 26. enchanted viewpoint, which sees Santra as an enigmatic, yet strangely famil-  
 27. iar figure, as if Santra had always been present in her life, as if everything  
 28. around Santra is precious and valuable and every object speaks to Tervo in  
 29. ways that fulfil a certain longing. Tervo talks about secretly loving Santra, as  
 30. if she had 'fallen in love with a man who was already happily married', and  
 31. wishing that Santra could be her grandmother. By filming Santra, Tervo hopes  
 32. to become part of Santra's world, since in Santra's cottage she felt more at  
 33. home than anywhere else (see Mononen 2014a).

34. For Tervo, filming seems to be an activity among others, a natural part of  
 35. life and a way of being in the world, just as singing is for Santra. In general,  
 36. she speaks rather lightly about making the film. This attitude becomes visible  
 37. in a scene where she strokes a cat with the boom mic. As Tervo ironically  
 38. notes near the conclusion, after a few years she began to feel embarrassed  
 39. about always returning to 'knit in the corner of Santra's cottage and pretend-  
 40. ing to be filming'. Filming-living as an artistic attitude allows movement  
 41. within and beyond the film world, as it is a process of constant invention and  
 42. discovery that avoids strict categorizations such as distinguishing the 'real',  
 43. 'imagined', cinematized or magical life.

44. Towards the end of the film there is more verbal communication between  
 45. the director and Santra. They even have a conversation about Tervo's non-  
 46. existent love life, concluding that she needs to 'find a man', about which  
 47. they laugh. Santra decides they should go to the sauna, where rites are often  
 48. performed. She recites a spell standing naked in the dark doorway of the  
 49. sauna, as if in a portal to another world, a world of magic and myths, while  
 50. wooden floors creak under her feet: 'I see him coming, rushing to us. He's got  
 51. six cups in his hand, a seventh behind his back'. A lively melody accompanies  
 52. archival images of Karelian women waving a loaf of bread around a bride



*Images 2a and 2b: In consecutive images, Tervo and the little girl are juxtaposed by the same gesture they make. In the film edit, they are brought together several times, but their connection is left undisclosed, always open to new meanings. Frame enlargements from the film, courtesy of For Real Productions.*

with a scarf wrapped around her head, then of a couple enjoying a merry dance. The frenetic whispers of women on the soundtrack are reminiscent of sorcerers and create a sense of strange allure in the scene. The juxtaposition of the two scenes with 'magical Karelian women', Santra and the women in the archival film, and the act of bringing them into the film's shared space erodes the temporal distance and blurs the boundary between the magical and 'the real'.

In the opening sequence of the film, a little girl with long blonde hair walks through a misty meadow, glancing behind her towards the spectator, while on the soundtrack harp music, often associated with fairy tales, suggests an other-worldly place. The girl may be thought of as an alter ego of the director, who appears shortly thereafter running in a street, since she makes the same gesture as the little girl: looks behind her, straight at the camera, inviting the viewer into the film world.

The same girl later appears in Santra's cabin and is identified as her grandchild. Towards the end of the film, after Tervo reveals that her own child has been born, the girl appears in another meadow scene very similar to the initial one. In this context, she could embody the bliss, wonder and sense of belonging that the director has finally found in having a family of her own. However, the little girl as a figure is never quite fixed in a single role, but 'wanders' and sticks ambiguously into the narrative.



## GROUNDING FORCES

While the 'body' of *Santra and the Talking Trees* is composed of a wide array of material, there are particular elements at play that ground the flow of sounds and images: the soundboard and language that are connected to a way of being in the world, and the recurrent archival images from an old ethnographic film foregrounding the director's wish to create memory with images.

Tervo's recorded voice-over pulls together the material and the pieces of the narrative and lends an intimate, strongly subjective tone to the entire film. Tervo sometimes speaks standard Finnish, using graceful phrases like 'envying the trees for their roots', and other times colloquial language with a dialect that is a mixture of northern and eastern Finnish dialects. She sounds quite young, and occasionally her voice becomes very thin and delicate, bringing out an earnest tone in her speech. At times Tervo uses humorous expressions, for instance recounting how her father calls her 'a butt blown by the wind', that is, a restless soul. These choices bring an air of informality to the film and convey a sense of authenticity to the speaking self. As the story advances, Tervo adopts some words from Santra's eastern dialect into her own speech, a detail that underscores how much the narrator/director wishes to merge into the Karelian cultural realm.

Another grounding force, also linguistic, is the singing, speaking, spell-reciting Santra, who is a vital part of the film's soundboard. She speaks a Karelian dialect of Finnish. Her rich and colourful vocabulary derives partly from the Karelian language or from Russian.<sup>10</sup> Although much of Santra's language is lost in translation, the onomatopoeic language or pure nonsense used in the songs can be appreciated by non-Finnish speakers.

Besides the moods conveyed by the language and songs, deeply rooted in the embodied existence of the characters, the film's 'tone worlding' is created with sounds from nature recurring in many scenes, such as birds singing and chirping or the wind blowing in a cornfield. Ecological worlding is at times very literally present in *Santra and the Talking Trees*. Santra herself talks about the habit of leaning against trees and feeling as if her life was supported by them: 'When life felt really bad [...] I went and embraced a pine; it made me feel much better. Pine trees pull bad things out of people'. She advises others to find their own trees, trees that suit them best, be it a pine tree or a spruce. Similar to indigenous cultures, ancient Karelian knowledge creates a sense of belonging deeply rooted in nature. Contrary to many other contemporary films that present nature as a force indifferent to human suffering, in Tervo's film the cosmos is caring.<sup>11</sup>

Although it is not articulated in the film itself, the black-and-white archival images originate mainly from the silent ethnographic film *Häiden vietto Karjalan runomailta (Karelian Wedding in the Land of the Kalevala)* (Väisänen, 1921). Here people played themselves in recreated scenes of a traditional Karelian wedding as the ethnologist-film-makers wished to present it.

Clips from this film are recurrent in *Santra and the Talking Trees*, showing the rituals, dances, spells, games, healers, weeping women and musicians in the wedding celebration. The repetitive appearance of these images throughout the film gives them an important role in the narrative, as they often align with Tervo's story on the soundtrack. For example, when she speaks of rootlessness, insecurity and how 'it is soothing to lean on somebody or something older, bigger and wiser than I am', the ethnographic film depicts an older,

10. For example the phrase *hospotipahoslovi*, that Santra uses, derives from a Russian saying, meaning: 'may the Lord bless'. The Karelian dialect of Finnish is not the same thing as the Karelian language, which is an independent Finnic language. Nevertheless, it resembles eastern dialects of Finnish with some words originating from Russian.
11. For more on the relationship between the cosmos and humans in film, see Ivakhiv (2013b).



Image 3: The recurring scenes from the old ethnographic film *Karelian Wedding in the Land of the Kalevala* (1921) reappear in the film, aiming to create memory in the present with the images. Frame enlargement from the film, courtesy of For Real Productions, material originally from KAVI (National Audiovisual Institute).

weeping woman guiding a younger one who is blindfolded. Through repetition, the film encourages the viewer to enter into and linger in these archival images, in an effort to make the viewer imagine with the images. The archival images thus obtain expressive powers of their own, not necessarily attached to the time of their making, so that it becomes possible to remember in the present (Hongisto 2015: 28–29).

### A RHYTHM THAT REMEMBERS

In the film experience, there are always ‘excesses’ that arouse sensations, memories and anticipations that speak in multiple, bodily felt ‘voices’. Yet excess in this case is not something exterior to the film narrative, but inherently part of how the film works as an aesthetic whole and how we relate to the film and the world through our entire bodily being (see Marks 2000: xvi–xvii, 231). In *Santra and the Talking Trees*, the felt senses of Karelian culture cannot always be pinpointed to a certain image or a sound; they arise from the silences, image flows and audio layers created with editing and other cinematic techniques.

In her study on sensory representation in intercultural cinema, Laura Marks asks how film can express inexpressible excesses or sensorial experiences that cinematic technology is unable to transmit, such as those related to taste, touch and smell (Marks 2000: xiii, xvi, 129). ‘Objects, bodies, and intangible things hold histories within them that can be translated only imperfectly’, she writes (Marks 2000: 131). While we have to accept that film can awaken memories and the past only partially, the multisensory nature of cinematic expression allows for the evocation of bodily rhythms, a sense of texture

1. and associations that can enable 'holistic meaning-making' (see Takala 2014:  
2. 170). As Marks notes, films can bear traces of sensorial experiences and evoke  
3. embodied memories, especially in situations of displacement, that is, when  
4. the connection to one's own culture is lost (Marks 2000: 2).

5. Tervo weaves together evocative patterns of sound and sight with vari-  
6. ous cinematic techniques that appeal to all the senses. Some of these routes  
7. to cinematic worlding can be opened up through the concepts of rhythm and  
8. trace. The sensation of rhythm requires repetition and the variation of certain  
9. cinematic elements – patterns – in order to create structures of affect, like a  
10. sense of tension and release. Trace refers to communication between the film  
11. world, the historical world and the viewer's body-world, making tangible in  
12. experience things, people and ideas that are absent, in this case the ancient  
13. Finnish Karelian culture (see Wahlberg 2008: xiv, 42, 150).

14. In *Santra and the Talking Trees*, the cinematic rhythms created with editing  
15. and animations layer and contrast image and sound elements to make some-  
16. thing that is absent (from on-screen reality) emerge. The motifs of Karelian  
17. culture are awakened through rhythmic patterns, which according to Karen  
18. Pearlman are moulded by the timing and dynamic movements in images,  
19. sounds, emotions, ideas and stories (Pearlman 2009: 83–87). Rhythm in  
20. editing can refer to physical rhythm, which creates energy with patterns and  
21. trajectories of movement as the scene advances (Pearlman 2009: 91). This  
22. in turn is connected to emotional rhythm, expressing emotive concentration and  
23. dispersal within scenes, often related to the embodied presence of the actors/  
24. subjects of the film (Pearlman 2009: 111). With 'event rhythm' Pearlman  
25. refers to the rhythmical changes – pacing and trajectories affecting the move-  
26. ment of events that influence the film's structure as a whole (Pearlman 2009:  
27. 131). I interpret these rhythms more freely than Pearlman, as her examples  
28. derive mainly from mainstream American film, where somewhat conven-  
29. tional narrative forms are favoured.

30. 'The more I sat there [in Santra's cabin], the more I began to remem-  
31. ber who I was and what the past was like', says Tervo. A swooshing sound  
32. leads into a trance-like montage scene lasting several minutes around the  
33. midpoint of the film. The scene builds up physical and emotional tension by  
34. its duration and by overlaying non-diegetic contemporary music with diverse  
35. images from different ages and sources. The song 'Running on', performed  
36. by Finnish synthpop group Villa Nah, is composed of a steady electronic  
37. beat, an anxious-sounding male lead voice, synthesizers and keyboards.  
38. The lyrics begin with the phrases 'What you runnin' for? What you keep on  
39. hidin' forever?' – which may be interpreted as referring to Tervo's own rest-  
40. less lifestyle.

41. The montage sequence establishes connections between the past and  
42. present with several cuts. From these moments of audio-visual movement  
43. kinetic impressions arise. In the first clip from *Karelian Wedding*, a young boy  
44. repeatedly leaps in the air and a couple dances to the rhythm of the song.  
45. Performed to contemporary music, the movements are reminiscent of break-  
46. dance or a similar modern street style. The modern music combined with old  
47. images of dancers creates a feeling of intimacy; as the viewer is invited to  
48. become attuned to dancers from another time and place, a century's remove  
49. does not seem that far away anymore: a borderline reality between the past  
50. and the present becomes palpable. This type of cinematic worlding stays  
51. open to different involvements and awakens multisensory experiences in the  
52. viewer.

12. On manipulating energy within a film, see Pearlman (2009: 136).

In another cut, a blond girl in a meadow brushes her hair in the golden evening light, and in the next image, an archival clip, a man brushes his long beard. In one contact point, a bearded man plays the *kantele*, a traditional Finnish string instrument, in *Karelian Wedding*, in the same rhythm as the keyboard solo of 'Running on', heard slightly manipulated on the soundtrack. The juxtaposition makes the archival image feel vibrant; the player's fingers seem energized by the contemporary synthpop music. The montage sequence could be interpreted as a nodal point in the 'event rhythm' of the film, where many of the main themes, such as building connections between the past and present, are condensed into meaningful cuts and contrasts. This fairly long sequence near the end of the film, lasting a couple of minutes, gathers momentum as the chain of events in Tervo's film-life begin to unravel from this point on.<sup>12</sup>

There are several recurring images or motifs in the film: the dances and spells taken from *Karelian Wedding*, the little girl wandering in a meadow, the young woman running in a street, the lakes, forests and roads filmed during different seasons from a moving car and a train. The repetitive structure of these scenes creates physical rhythm and movement throughout the film. The landscapes are shot on various film materials: old, new, grainy and sharp, with tinted or 'realistic' colours. The constant, slight changes in images and soundscapes associated with the same motifs, rich in cultural and mythical symbols, contribute to the flickering aesthetic of the film. The recurring images, sounds and motifs bring a feeling of familiarity. Yet by connecting recurring elements, such as the berries, the birds or the dance scenes from the Karelian wedding, to different contexts, sometimes with rather free associations, the film also creates volatility within the familiar. Repetition is a way of remembering in a moving world.

### HOW TO FIND YOUR WAY HOME?

The trace does not simply refer to the materiality of film as an imprint, in image or in sound, but opens up paths to recollection and experience of time, as Malin Wahlberg points out. According to her, film as a technology of memory can make present historical experiences and shared memories that are absent or pushed aside in the present moment (2008: 150). In the mnemonic operations of documentary film, the past can be brought into conversation with the present.

By referring to traces, I do not mean that the clips from *Karelian Wedding* are used as 'evidence' of the past; rather they are given a new life and a new meaning in the film's context. The old images become part of Tervo's endeavour to remember and become part of a broken chain of tradition in order to feel rooted in the world. Yet this almost lost culture evoked with sensorial experiences in the film is not defined in itself.

Instead, Tervo embarks on playing with the objects, practices (such as knitting) and symbols related to Karelian culture and linking them to her own story. By playing, I refer to the experimental way she explores a culture unknown to her: the film world becomes a playground where the environment and the past reveal themselves to the spectator in a novel way. Miriam Hansen writes about this playful engagement with the world through the 'image-space' in film and points out, referring to Benjamin, how cinema can open up 'vast and unsuspected fields of action' (Hansen 2004: 22).

In *Santra and the Talking Trees* the animations featuring traditional Karelian handicrafts and elements from nature evoke the material and haptic aspects

1. of memory. Handicraft in itself is a form of transmitting traditions and stories.  
 2. In the animations, pieces of lace, berries and scarfs with strong black-red-  
 3. green flower patterns, birds made of pine needles and other Karelian symbols  
 4. and ornaments stitched on white linen towels begin to move. Their forms  
 5. are contrasted with pieces of roots, leaves and moss. In a particularly joyful  
 6. sequence in the musical montage, Karelian pies 'bunny hop' in the rhythm of  
 7. the song. These objects form bodily connections through their materiality, as  
 8. traces of physical experiences that have been passed from one generation to  
 9. the next as sensory memories of touch, smell and taste, like the warmth and



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49. *Images 4 a, b and c: Karelian pies dancing to a synthpop song by Villa Nah. In*  
 50. *the animated sequences, the Karelian motifs are brought to life, while the elements*  
 51. *form playful arrangements to the rhythm of the music. Frame enlargements from*  
 52. *the film, courtesy of For Real Productions.*

smell of woolly mittens or the cool, smooth surface and fresh sweetness of berries.

The moving objects also reveal, in a literal sense, the animated quality of the non-human, material world around us. This is reminiscent of Jean Epstein's view on cinema's 'animistic' powers, as it makes objects seem alive, even gesticulating to the viewer: 'by summoning objects out of the shadows of indifference into the light of dramatic concern' (Epstein [1924] 1993: 316–17). This bringing-to-life also becomes visible in the film stock of the archival images, revealing the chemical process behind their making. The images turn into a living thing as the grains glimmer and the play of light on the film material emphasizes the image's tactile qualities, reminding us that film has a life of its own.

In *Santra and the Talking Trees* the audience is taken on a journey, where not only the first-person subject in the film, but also the film as an aesthetic whole strives to make contact with the past, with ancestors and with the buried cultural knowledge of where we came from, who we are and where we are going. From a diasporic state of being out of sync with the world, the past and cultural roots, the director and the self of the film creates memory in a process of cinematic worlding. In the film she imagines a lively 'domestic sphere' made of old archival films, sounds and other miscellaneous material where private and shared histories coincide. The self and the world are entwined in a rhythmic over-layering of different realities, times and presences. Worlding attuned with history is an ongoing practice, where new imaginings of the past are created and its traces are given life and movement in the here and now. As Tervo's documentary suggests, filming can be thought of as a way of connecting to the world and, as such, images and sounds can create a place to dwell in, a nest to rest in.

'I guess I had given up on ever finding my way home. Or that I would ever find love', declares Tervo in the final episode of the film. In an animation, lingonberries crush onto a white linen cloth. Karelian women tuck a young girl into bed and men set fishnets from their boat. These characters appear like benevolent wizards, acting behind the scenes while modern life moves on at its restless pace.

'However it was, a miracle happened. Love finally found me', Tervo announces as a chunk of dough is slammed onto the baking board. In animations, a Karelian pie gets a filling, a thread finds the eye of a needle, berries fall into a basket, a knife slips into its sheath and mittens find their mates. Whispering voices are heard again, as a Karelian couple dances in the ethnographic film. Pieces of moss come together in animation, and a breastfeeding baby is shown in close-up. 'Suddenly, I was also responsible for someone else's roots', Tervo declares as she walks along a supermarket aisle with her child sitting in the cart.

In the last scene, Tervo ponders how to transfer tradition to the next generation. 'But maybe I still remembered enough: That traditions are a form of love. That as long as there is love in the form of tradition, it runs over the graves and never dies', the director concludes. The camera pans across a forest and a lake on a summer night with a purple sky overhead, and then to an idyllic cemetery located among tall trees. Tervo sings an old Karelian lullaby in a very soft voice, almost whispering, while a music box plays in the background: 'Ljuuli ljuuli ljuuli lastu ...' The end titles recount that Santra Remsujeva 'passed on to the world beyond ours' at the age of 96. A singing link between the mythical past and the present world is emerging.

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