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Under the Savo Sky - A Philosophical Time-Travel Mosaic

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Abstract

Using his words, the essayist endeavours to build a mosaic-like Kuopio. To do so, he also needs the help of photographs. A time-trip will reveal the multifaceted nature of Kuopio, constructed from small pieces. The Savo sky is like a large existential mirror, reflecting past, present and future time. The vaulted mirror of life above the landscape reveals the everyday moments of various generations. Interspersed among the flickering images are glimpses of the joys and sorrows of individuals and of the whole nation. Individual and community are presented both alongside and nested inside each other. The market place, as a time-square, acts as the space where events unfold. It resembles an existential theatre where various sequences of events take place. An essayistic or philosophical time-travel mosaic means a flâneur's wanderings through the existential stream of Kuopio city life. As an anonymous observer, the traveller notices many kinds of things. From these he formulates a coherent and confidently worded overall picture. In this way, an intellectual-artistic self-portrait of Kuopio takes shape. The role of the essayist is demanding: he must be able to act as a contemporary observer, critic and artist. He can therefore also be seen as an omniscient narrator – simultaneously both as a reader and a writer. The essayist thus lives and tells an existential story – a story of the forms of 'kuopioness' across time. It is a story worth each and everyone of us listening to.

Keywords: time-travel mosaic; time-square; travel literature; verbal and pictorial gaze; essayistic tradition

Motto

"The reflections in the mirrors sped her through time and space – she was simultaneously here and immersed in the depths of another time; in her childhood and in the mythical time of the Norns, beneath the eternal oak tree." Kähkönen, 2016b, p. 238.

"Come on a time-travel journey to a city that no one can dismantle." Kähkönen, 2011, p. 5.

Towards a time-square

The essay you have in front of you contains various ways of looking at the world. You could also call them partial mosaics. Together, they draw a picture constituting a coherent mosaic entity. It is a harmonious verbal painting in which Kuopio, as seen from different directions, emerges. What we have is some kind of "viewing device" combining language and image – a ViewMaster – allowing the reader to look at four multidimensional existential images of Kuopio's market square. Perhaps it could also be described as a scientifically-tinted artistic time-postcard.

A key figure in the Finnish essayistic tradition is the versatile writer Kersti Bergroth. In her explorations of the themes of time and being, she has followed the path of spiritual profundity paved by Henri Bergson and Marcel Proust. This eloquent and telling quote is from her wide-ranging work *'Essays'*.

"Gradually I realised that if you want to understand (Marcel) Proust, then you have to temporarily change, as if to become him himself [- -] Once you have changed back to your own self, you can look at and evaluate Proust's work in the same way as if you were reviewing something in the lifetime you yourself have lived [- -] In its opening pages, Proust's great novel, 'A la recherche du temps perdu' (In Search of Lost Time), describes the way a person wakes up in the morning. [- -] From night into day, from familiar slumber to astonishing daytime existence. Before you lies a new world with a bed, a door, a table. Your thoughts are still loose, still running riot. Your emotions wash in waves from past to present, from the lows of the soul, from fundamental wistfulness to the sensory wavelets of this moment. [- -] The reader feels that he himself is the experiencer of moments of slumber and awakening." (Bergroth, 1950, pp. 28–29.)

How to interpret the world around you accurately, intelligibly? How to reach the daily dawns and dusks of previous generations? Or into the heart of the everyday experiences of future generations? In short: is it possible, even to some extent, to become another person, to step into and become part of his or her apposite state of being?

We have to create an exploratory verbal and pictorial gaze across the time-square. Only in this way can an in-depth analysis of the situation be achieved. Such a procedure is also required to promote the ideal of quality essay writing. The essayist must be able to express ideas as part of the world of language.



Photograph 1. Looking across the time-square.

In 1940, Vilho Setälä's book *Photography as Science and Art* was published. A good eight decades ago, then, Setälä was already reflecting interestingly on the role of the photographer. His thoughts still seem worthwhile and valid today: "However, it is quite wrong to think that the photographer does not have his freedoms. All we have to do is choose any landscape or group of buildings and then take a few steps forward or backward, to the right or to the left, and soon we see how the factors affecting the picture as a whole are constantly changing. We have complete freedom to choose the correct viewpoint, and to a large extent it is in exercising this freedom that the secret of taking a beautiful picture lies." (Setälä, 1940, 434.)

I, as a contemporary interpreter, am able to stand in a Kuopio time-square at a point from which detailed observation of people and hackney carriages – taxis – would have been possible even at the actual moment when the photograph was taken, in 1936. My non-reflective, open-minded attitude ensures for me a connection to a real historical situation: access to the origins of a presence expended on time-travel. Since time immemorial, it has been possible for someone to find themselves in a situation in which, for example, a city, as an existential milieu, presents itself as a home of being. In other words, this is also a very practical perspective that opens up multi-level views of experienced everyday life. What does it mean for a space or place to become home-like? Or would it be more realistic to talk about consciously

making a landscape home-like? (On urban studies, see e.g. Benjamin, 2007; Itkonen, 2006; 2012a; 2012b; Mumford, 1949.)

The hackney cabs for hire along the street were also probably among the practical objects that were part of everyday life. But at that time, summer 1936, they were certainly not part of everybody's daily experience. In most cases, taking a taxi was probably to do with some kind of special occasion, such as a party, a visit or illness.

The photographer who took photo 1 must have climbed the Kuopio City Hall tower, thus exercising their artistic freedom in choosing the right "eyepoint". In any case, the end result is quite impressive: from a high, metaphysical vantage point, the view opens up over the entire landscape, towards the expanses of Lake Kallavesi. A feeling of being at home is created. For the viewer, the idea of roads leading to safety and warmth comes to mind.

Geographical location is probably of little importance in this context: a familiar region may include several 'kuopios' – according to where a person's home might be. Of the essential elements, devoted attachment is the most important. Of course, the strength of the overall feeling is also influenced by the people close to you, the lived others who range from the closeness of relatives to the remoteness of anonymous strangers. (For an examination of Finnishness, see, for example, von Bagh, 2002; Iso-Markku and Kähkönen, 2007; Itkonen, 2019; 2021a; 2021b.)

It is also possible to consider language as a home of partnership: living there ensures that mutual understanding can be achieved. Each person may therefore think themselves capable of understanding what the intended message is. And vice versa: each person may also assume that they are being understood. Otherwise, communication or interaction would be impossible.

I, as a human being of the future, probably represent a third participant compared to the photographer and to those existing in the time-square: a kind of external he/she element who through their writings in the inner world of the essay is giving birth to a faceless me, to anyone or to no one. It is a matter of everyone or no one. Those who have gone before, the people at the market, are in a you-position with regard to me. I lack the information and the words to characterize their true essence. It's true, though, that the distance in time is so great that I can't be absolutely sure about it. Inevitably, the he/she category probably always implies a certain degree of fabrication, fantasy and fiction.

The time-square refers to the imaginary and real Kuopio market square. The time-travel mosaic under the Savo sky is thus both a scientific and artistic fabric of writing. As such, it represents a cultural-philosophical study creation linking word and image together.

Once upon a time on Kuopio's market square

The market as a space frees up a space. Or the market brings a space to life. It is not just an open space between two opposite sides, for example. The market square brings both edges and puts them one beside the other. In this way the entirety of the market is constructed. It means a milieu that has placed itself in reality for a person. So, it's about a human-sized space, characterized by its many faces. In other words, the space exists for various purposes. Market square time is stratified everyday time.

Some cities are known for their markets. We could perhaps talk about Kuopio's market as a concept in itself. It is a guarantee of quality. Tammela market in Tampere is also renowned. It too is associated with the idea of quality. The atmosphere of the market obviously plays an important role in the impression of quality. Of course, the goods on sale and the market vendors are also essential enablers of sophistication. But it would probably be right to say that the most important thing about Kuopio is its Savo-ness, which is thought of as associated with a unique existential atmosphere. People talk about folksy joviality. It is probably some kind of peaceful benevolence and cheerfulness.

War, with its ideals and goals, arrived at the market place as well. Could the ideal of quiet joviality have been valued then? An examination of the question once again requires the presence of photographs.



Photograph 2. Soldier boys' sports championships A.



Photograph 3. Soldier boys' sports championships B.

The present was the Continuation War: late summer 1942. The exact date is not important. Other things are more significant. This is also a point worth stressing: this is neither a study of military history nor of war tourism. The time traveller concentrates on other kinds of observation. The main focus is on reflecting about the spirit of a place and the urban milieu.

Written echoes of the past are also needed. The military and disciplined parade needs the insightful words of Sinikka Kallio-Visapää to accompany it. Her fascinating work, *Santiagoon Simpukka* (The Scallop Shell of Santiago), is one of the classics of Finnish travel literature, with its succinct subtitle "Travel essays and picture series from Spain". Kallio-Visapää describes nested hiking trails. Perhaps we could even call them earthly and heavenly hiking trails.

Kallio-Visapää's text is insightful, fluent and appealing to the reader: "The blood red of the sun is extinguished, but the air is 'bright' even in the dark, the firmament a hard and cold element, like black glass. While the stars sow their white sparks on its surface, below on the ground the little hay fires of the shepherds are lit. Shell carries us along an invisible road, the Scallop Shell keeps us on course, and above there gleams the familiar misty arc of the Milky Way. If we had the eyes to see, we could now distinguish the night roads which in Spain lead from up to down and from down to up, as crowded with travellers as the earthly routes are by day. Along them, the wanderers of heaven and earth meet each other and reach each other's

dwelling as easily as if there were no difference between these two spheres of existence, no greater distance than that which the eye can embrace in one look.” (Kallio-Visapää, 1952, pp. 75–76.)

The time traveller moves from the ambiances of Spain to wartime Kuopio. Even in olden days the market was the centre of events. We can make this claim despite the fact that the parade only passed alongside the market square. Nevertheless, the square as a space dominated the space and gathered the levels of time into its essence. It was not in the role of a bystander but rather the main protagonist of a state of being. It is as if all the ideals of the age had assembled on the square: the cause of the Finnish Fatherland was shared by all. Collective narratives bound people to the same reality. The soldier was the heroic figure of everyday life. Sport was raising boys to become future soldiers. The march was the time signature for the days of war. Music raised the sense of solidarity. Leaders were admired and followed. Society was more important than the individual. The goal of all activity was to forget oneself. Individuality was replaced by communality. Finland's independence was the prerequisite vital lifeblood of the whole nation.

The past and the future march against each other and meet in the present. Memory and expectation move towards perception from opposite directions. The situation could be likened to the roads of the night and the routes of the day mentioned by Kallio-Visapää. The travellers would be wanderers of the past, of the present and of a time yet to come. The short journey from ideal to manipulation, the conscious "tampering" with minds, is timeless. Did the parade in photographs 2 and 3 represent some kind of patriotic pilgrimage? Alongside the visible marchers, an invisible ideological procession advanced. Alongside sport and play marched the ideals of valour, war and heroism.

In architecture, too, time strata were located in parallel and intertwined. Wooden Kuopio breathes the atmosphere of the bygone. The future frenzy of modernisation was not yet known. The magnificent town hall has endured through all of the enthusiasm for updating. The stylish lyceum school building still exists. Both of these witnessed the marching parades of the soldier boys' sports championships. Or, to once again interpret the thoughts of Kallio-Visapää, it was about a simultaneous and parallel march past of a visible and an invisible parade. In addition to the heavenly and earthly procession, concrete and metaphorical childhood and adulthood also took part in the march.

In photo 2, the camera observing the parade is slightly further away from its subject than in photo 3. Moving closer to the subject makes the scene slightly more transparent. The grown men, perceived by the senses to be soldiers, appear to be concrete and honest figures. They flag their patriotism with unabashed showmanship. In picture 2, the sporting boys, the unshaped blanks for future soldiers, still proceed in the background. They are like predictive reflections of an ideal tomorrow: glimpses of the right kind of manhood, of model citizenship.

In photograph 3, the soldier boys have moved to centre stage. Did a possible manipulation then become more clearly distinguishable? Or are the boys placed in an adult world of interpretation? In that case, of course, reality would be looked at through a distorting lens. Presumably it was enough for the boys that they were just living one of the most solemn moments of their lives.

The parade also signifies the passage of time. The researcher of the 2020s locates the parade in his own present and his own experience of Kuopio. The market square brings the generations close together. I wonder whether it would now be possible to call it the Kuopiago Scallop Shell? It would tell the traveller the way. The Scallop Shell would also guide the time traveller along its interpretative route. The cultural wayfarer would also be able to see the wanderers of yesteryear. Through the eyes of his soul, he follows the evocative march of the soldier boys in their games. The traveller sees the visible and the invisible parade. Perhaps he also wanders alongside Sinikka Kallio-Visapää beneath a Spanish sky resembling black glass. Everything is possible – just as it was on the Kuopio marketplace once upon a time. (For an analysis of the time thematic, see also Deluze, 2018; Itkonen, 2015; 2018; Kähkönen, 2016a.)

Below the future sky

Bergroth skilfully explores the difference between a memory and a photograph. The person in her novel sees the photograph as an unauthentic, impersonal industrial product. Memory, on the other hand, she sees as a unique handcrafted delicate work of art. A photograph reproduces a world. A memory creates a world. "It was difficult for Aili to get into the hall. She had a clear image of one part of the hall because the family photo had been taken in the hall. But it was the photograph that blocked and disturbed Aili's remembering. Suddenly, there in the midst of the blurred and fragile memory, was this stark 'reality'. They say that a photograph doesn't lie, but for Aili the photograph was a lie and the memory was reality. Aili felt that the photograph was disgracing her entire world of memories. In the picture, the old hall was clearly and nakedly visible in the tiniest detail. But in the rooms of memory, the pieces of furniture were not precise, mechanical and plainly obvious, but they had a kind of subtle softness, they shimmered artistically. Memory must be an artist, Aili thought. All the pictures of our past are works of art! A photograph is not nice because nature in a photograph looks as if it was made in a factory. In reality and in memories, nature looks like a handicraft industry. It is irregular, whimsical, just as elegant as genuine handicraft always is. In a photograph, nature looks mass-produced." (Bergroth, 1948, pp. 18–19.)



Photograph 4. The timeless market hall and Hotel Atlas.

Present are the early 1980s. Photograph 4 provides a view of the market square, which is flanked by two buildings of national importance: the market hall and Hotel Atlas. I shall start my exploration in the market hall. When examined from an everyday perspective it has a multi-dimensional essence.

When, deep in thought, I have walked towards the market hall, my thoughts have been preoccupied by the words of Yrjö Kokko, which I have read earlier. They were published in the stimulating travel book *The Islands of Good Will*, published in 1953. Kokko looks at his native land from a distant vantage point, the Canary Islands, and movingly writes (p. 317): "Is the fatherland, then, the time in which a person is born, where they have grown up and which dies with them? Perhaps the fatherland is only

the soil on which they were born, the home district which, compared to the universe, is no greater than the grave they are hidden in when they die. But isn't the fatherland the people who speak their language, the people with whom they have shared their joys and sorrows, their common destinies? But indeed generations pass away. New generations do not think and feel the same. Opinions change, as do circumstances. When one's own generation dies, does one's own people also die?"

From a distance, things are seen differently than from up close. There is not just one market hall, but many market halls, each differing from the other. The spirit of the place is a narrative or story of market hallness, the nature of which varies according to the individual experiencing it. The ages and generations also scoop out their verbal furrow into the fulfilled soul of the building as it is lived out. The wide open doors can be thought of as gates to linguistic yesterdays. You just have to be able to sensitize yourself to listen. Is it though still possible to understand anything other than the speech of one's own generation?

The sculpture of the boy in the foreground, *Veljmies* (Brother), has witnessed the change of modern times. It has also seen the departure of some people and the arrival of new ones to replace them. Now, accompanying me as well, this time in summer photos of Kuopio in the 1980s, it is making observations about the essential natures of the square and the market hall. The *Siskotyttö* (Sister) statue at the opposite end of the building has been in place for a much shorter period than this Brother companion of mine. To paraphrase the writer Kokko's questions, you could play with the idea that the market hall resembles the idea of a fatherland, of which at least a part disappears with each generation. That is why the spirit of place, which was close to its predecessors, is alien to succeeding generations. They narrate into being their own market hallness. The cycle is endless: familiar territory to one person is alien to another. The market hall has many expressions on its local face.

At the beginning of the section, Bergroth's profound novel *This Life* was quoted. In the quotation, the photograph is seen as a machine-made factory product. A memory, on the other hand, is seen as art because it contains an elegance and a uniqueness of craftsmanship. So, are all photos pure illusion, reflecting the world as an excessively blatant immobility? Is it in memories, then, that we can find the aesthetics of yesteryear that can still make the past shimmer so powerfully in the midst of a present that is forever trickling away?

If you want to linger under the future sky, you should stay at the Hotel Atlas. It had already featured prominently in Valentin Vaala's 1936 film *Vaimoke* (The Wife). This traditional hotel is still in its original location. Since its renovation, the Atlas has become a modern, upmarket hotel. Fortunately, becoming part of the Scandic chain did not destroy the renowned Atlas name.

In fact, the traveller staying at the Hotel Atlas is lingering under a sky of timelessness. For this reason the traveller also understands the ultimate truth of

existence: the Kuopio marketplace can simultaneously mean something existent and something non-existent. Only a very content-rich place can conjure up such an impression in a person. In an environment like that, one can simultaneously be passing time at home and in the midst of a dream milieu. Which is why it is possible to claim that the Kuopio market square is both precisely here and nowhere at one and the same time. But isn't it just that nowhere that means the same as everywhere? Once you have visited Kuopio market square, it is almost a duty to long for it elsewhere in the market squares of the big wide world.

Perhaps my essay has revealed one truth: the very essence of the kind of Kuopio that I have wanted to encounter. In the corridors of my memory that city on Lake Kallavesi shines like a gently flickering flame. Its warmth is the safe warmth of a home where I'm always welcome. This is what life is like under the Savo sky. It means both a state of being that is outside time and one that is appropriate always and everywhere. (For a skilful description of the spirit of time and place in fiction, see, for example, Jääskeläinen, 1953; Kähkönen, 2017; 2019; 2022.)

Traveller, stop, stand still and listen: Kuopio is already calling you. So, without hesitation, head for Savo.

English translation by Glyn Hughes

Note

The title of this essay is a conscious tribute to Wim Wenders and his skilfully made film *Der Himmel über Berlin*, (literally *The Sky Over Berlin*, in English *Wings of Desire* and in Finnish *Under the Berlin Sky*) (1987). It also includes a thoughtful reference to Sirpa Kähkönen's excellent work *Under the Kuopio Sky* (2011). Wenders and Kähkönen have been essential inspirations for my recent essays, for which I am grateful to both of them.

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