

AERO

(Oh dear, Eero Saarinen, Master of Inconsistency)

Film Outline.

Roger Connah

(1992)

Prologue

THE SMALL TALK

Which lines should we take? Can we invent anything? Aphorisms?

Oscar Wilde: Consistency is the last resort of the unimaginative - What one wants to do is swim in the water, not stand up in it - No preconceived ideas - A tragedy for Contemporary Architecture?

Oh dear, oh dear, one more film on an architect. And what's more, one more film on a Finnish architect. We can already hear the yawns. Yes, but the work is interesting. It's different. It's visionary. It's sculptural. It's rational. And its...

Inconsistent.

Inconsistency is a taboo in Finland. It might be a taboo everywhere, but there's no denying it here. To all the little truth-seekers, Eero Saarinen was a master of inconsistency. This meant that he never began a new project with the previous one in mind. He never seemed to develop any of those type-forms other architects develop.

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OH DEAR

voi voi

Oh dear, and he seemed to have no basic patterns intrinsic to what they say is a true style. In fact, he had no architectural language that was rethought in each context. He just rethought, again and again.

Oh dear, this is getting worse. You mean, he did not particularly treat nature as a source of law. Nor, you mean, did he seem preoccupied with the idea of an architecture close to nature. I mean, are you telling me he had no totemic respect for anything other than the particular building and what solution it offered there and then. Oh dear, that sounds inconsistent. I mean really inconsistent!

OH DEAR, OH DEAR

Voi voi voi

Yet Eero Saarinen. you are going to tell me has a landscape magic as much Finnish as any Finn. Don't tell me, save your breath! No encyclopedia will write that.

Recently somebody suggested to me that anywhere else in the world it would be easy to be a Finnish architect. Everywhere except Finland. The shadow was too great. There's some truth in this.

So much contemporary architecture in Finland is as excellent as anywhere else in the world. But much of it seems unable to develop basic patterns identifiable with a true style. Much of it is thought inconsistent. Or then too consistent.

Too consistent that is with international architecture. How many Finns, after all, have been known for an international language? How many Finns have got away from this handsome tree sort of stuff?

A HANDSOME TREE?

This is a difficult one. Just who is responsible for an architecture closest to the realities of the age? And if those realities aren't quite handsome trees, landscape, then what of an architectural picture that conforms to nature? If I hear another foreign critic seeking buildings close to nature I swear, I'll brain them.

Oh dear, now we've offended the Finn in EveryFinn. But there's another point. Take a look at Eero Saarinen's buildings. All of them if built in Finland could be used to represent Finland.

You see, in a culture desperate to see its own culture mirrored in just about every piece of art it produces, Eero Saarinen would be wonderful. His wild sculptural forms would suit the landmass-sculpture approach of an Aalto or a Pietilä.

Also, shift a bit and we could discover those totemic responses to natural forms. Some of the other buildings like the Deere Building in Illinois quite simply look as if man and nature could again live in unison in architecture.

Voila, Eero Saarinen! Everyfinn go with you!

EVERYFINN

Oh dear, this is tricky stuff. When did this culture itself start getting tired of meeting its own image somewhere on the way back, in congresses, in the forest, amongst the amphitheatres? Finnish architecture? Finskt?

And what happens when it meets foreigners coming back for more? Those foreigners thinking that everything is close to nature. Foreigners thinking that all architects have but one aim in mind - to develop a national architectural language.

And that's not all, God forbid that all architects insist on natural materials and an intimate genius loci. Well, only then, we have to admit, does it sound that all architects seek but one thing: a tree.

But as Pessoa says, it must be a handsome one.

'A man, even though I can admit rationally that he is a living creature like myself always has had as far as that random most authentic part of me is concerned - less importance than a tree, provided it was a handsome one.'

THE FAMILY

Handsome trees. Architects always close to nature or MacDonald's hamburgers?

Master of inconsistency? This is why when three people from the same family find themselves researching into their Hero, they come up against a curious paradox.

Heroes the culture wants. Heroes contemporary architecture wants. Heroes the world wants.

But a hero as consistently inconsistent as Eero Saarinen? An architect with no preconceived ideas, no basic pattern or type-forms. Perhaps an architect with only a handsome tree in mind. Who wants a picture like that?

THE BIG PICTURE

Eero Saarinen is perfect for the so called tragedy of plural, no substance, contemporary architecture. But which Eero Saarinen is in the Sunday Times Celebrated Persons from The Twentieth Century list?

Only a film could attempt to answer this. And still, in a dignified manner, not come up with hasty answers. Only a little picture.

The big pictures are in America. And the big architects today are in America.

Eero Saarinen was in America. A big architect?

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THE BROTHERS

The youngest brother is asked at school to do a project. A famous Finn. A living, or not-quite-living, legend. He glances down the list. Like his other schoolfriends he pronounces INXS easier than he does the word 'architect'.

He eats AERO chocolate bars without realizing it is pronounced in English as *Eero* is pronounced in Finnish. Architect! Shit man, who wants to be an architect today. No style.

He lives near Kirkkonummi. He's heard vaguely of the name Saarinen. He doesn't know why. Something to do with the big house on the lake. So when the list comes round, he stops on the name Saarinen. Eero. The teacher agrees. Good choice, Anssi.

The younger brother studies at Otaniemi, engineering and computer processing. He would prefer to be at an American University where he could play ice hockey.

One of his projects is to prepare a small report on an architect who has contributed to the engineering vision. He doesn't understand 'engineering vision'. But he lives near Kirkkonummi and has heard vaguely of the name Saarinen.

He has never heard of the other names the lecturer offers him: Maillart, Nervi, Candela, Calatrava, Arup. He chooses Eero Saarinen. Good choice, the lecturer says. Nice one, Severi.

The oldest brother has studied architecture and journalism. He hasn't finished either but is now working on a doctorate. Having been given money for it, he must now complete the research.

His subject has to be chosen from the Living Legend Series of Finns Worldwide. The project is meant to explore the nature of their media success and the way journalism has interpreted them as Living Legends.

He used to live near Kirkkonummi with his brothers as a child. So he looked through the list: Sibelius. Gallen-Kallela. Tom of Finland. Minkinen. Vatanen. Nurmi. Kaurismaki. Aalto. Monroe. Saarinen. He chose Saarinen.

He remembered something about an arch and MacDonald's. He could make a good encyclopedia entry for EveryFinn Living Legends. He'd earn a little money too. Perhaps he could travel with his girlfriend.

Good choice, Juhani, his professor said. You'll have to go to America. You realize? Juhani smiled: Oh really!

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WHO DID WE LEAVE OUT?

She was studying photography in Helsinki. She was trying to get into the Swedish school. They had sent her papers. She had to prepare a portfolio. One of the themes for the portfolio was the built environment. How she hated that phrase. Close to nature next, she said to herself. That's what they'll want, photographs close to nature.

Will we ever escape this image? She remembered that Juhani, her boyfriend, had to do something on an architect. He would have all the material anyway. All she needed to do was tag along. Take her Nikon. She might even take the baby Konica. She was getting tired of these Cameras with brains.

That's what she'd do, she'd prepare a Comparative Portfolio. The Nikon-Konica Series on the buildings of... what was the name of that architect he was writing his thesis on.. oh yes...Eero Saarinen.

She returned the application form to Sweden informing them of the project. No, she wouldn't be delivering it to Stockholm herself, she would send it. Yes, she might make a film out of the work. No, it wouldn't be a video. Yes, it might have commercial possibility. No, she didn't think commercial incentive was the only reason to do things. Yes, she wanted to be a photographer. No, she didn't think these were trick questions.

Yes, yes, yes, he lived close to nature, but so 'fuckin' what! She didn't write that last line on her application form. Yes, she would like to travel. Yes, to America. But no, she didn't particularly like hamburgers.

THE SYMPOSIUM

Architecture is in trouble today. No substance. That's all you hear. Every moment. No substance, where's the meat? Much architecture is unreasonably called Mickey Mouse Architecture.

This is an insult to Disney. But there is certainly a carnival in the air. Four researchers are invited to dinner at Hvitträsk outside Helsinki to discuss the dilemma.

A tragedy, they say, that architecture today is not celebrated. Instead, everyone thinks it's chaos. These researchers are here to discuss whether it is a chaos or a celebration. They are using as their substance, the work of Eero Saarinen.

Having anticipated a more 'individual' approach to each architectural task, the symposium thinks that through Saarinen they can explore the state of things.

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THE STATE OF THINGS

No Finnish architect has had the nerve and talent to be so inconsistent as Eero Saarinen. Charlatan or Genius? In a recent Sunday Times Research, only 4 Finns appear in the list of 1000 of the Most celebrated Persons of the 20th century. Eero Saarinen is one of them. (Aalto, Sibelius, Nurmi, the others). Really!

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THE OTHER STATE OF THINGS

Meaning is privatized at every moment. It's getting worse. No one turns up anymore to seminars, symposiums, congresses etc. Instead, they send their tapes, their cassettes, their videos. Teleconferencing will take over politics.

Then architecture.

The four researchers do not turn up to the dinner. Instead, with careful choice, they send their taped speeches. Chosen carefully, they send along also their personal recorders. It so happens that three of the speakers send Walkmans.

The fourth, a photographer, sends a camera. Its one of those small Watchman. All four have prepared a statement about Eero Saarinen and contemporary architecture.

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THE DINNER

The structure of the evening's dinner becomes the 'envelope' for the film. The four views of Saarinen are presented. Each 'speaker' presents two buildings of Saarinen to support his or her view.

Whilst the tape is running, the film shifts to the buildings and 'films' what the speaker is saying.

The 'three spoken views' present a different Eero Saarinen each time. The fourth view, through the camera, presents an unusual way of showing Saarinen. Saarinen as his work has never been filmed before.

This begins on the dinner table, then moves into film itself.

The evening passes. They talk. They get tired. They cannot agree. They drink.

The symposium closes. They go to bed.

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THE FILMSCRIPT

A more detailed filmscript is necessary now to structure the film.

Two clear elements exist; The Brothers and the Symposium.

The script will connect the two.

The brothers will be shown researching their little projects.

This will provide the basic bio data, as the Americans say, on Eero Saarinen.

Here sketches will be shown, photo-copied, the drawings looked at, and the books.

This will be contemporary and address the problems of interest and disinterest in architecture and nature.

The Symposium, on the other hand, will tackle the formal approach to architecture.

Through the dinner guests, at least six buildings of Saarinen will be shown in detail. (These will be shot in America especially for these views.)

As far as we know, no architectural film has approached the subject this way. It is important that the research into the material and the script be done in depth.

If so, the film will not only discuss Eero Saarinen but explore why there seems to be total confusion and apathy surrounding architecture and film today.

It is urgent to attempt something like this at this moment in time, when everyone talks of world fairs and 'mickey-mouse' architecture.

Architecture as hoax - it's a joke played on all of us.

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EPILOGUE

The closing of the film is crucial. The morning after, when the symposium speakers have slept, there is chaos all around in Hvittäask. Sleep, hangover, confusion.

Outside, calm landscape, an aircraft overhead. In one room overlooking the lake and with Hvitträsk in view, Juhani is writing up his encyclopedia entry. We see him at work on his processor.

He writes, then re-writes. He erases, then adds more. Finally, he has something ready. His legacy! Monica, his girlfriend is asleep. On the floor her portfolio of photographs is ready to go to Stockholm. He prepares to print. He switches the computer to print mode. He presses print. The laser printer goes into action. The camera catches the words as they come out.:

Eero Saarinen. Living Legend...

Anssi and Severi charge into the bedroom. Juhani, let's go. The snow is perfect.

Dumb enough for hockey!

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