

Introduction to what is political #1 – The Reading Circle

Jaana Kokko

jaana.m.kokko@aalto.fi

Abstract

This is my paper for the Cumulus Northern Mandate conference, held in May 24-26 in Espoo, Finland. This paper is giving a review to what is artistic research and it does it by reflecting the making of the film the Reading Circle (2010. 32 min). The paper together with the film will show one of my two methods of making art and making research; by posing a question.

The Reading Circle is an experimental film about the pleasure of collective rereading and it is inspired by Hannah Arendt's thinking. In the film five women meet in a private apartment in Helsinki to discuss the meaning they attach to the term "political". Women define the image of a political individual and a political woman: What does 'political' mean? How to define 'womanly political'? Is it possible to attain a revolutionism that transcends generations and redefine 'political'?

KEYWORDS: politics, reading circle, Hannah Arendt, methodology of making art

Introduction

The Reading Circle (2010, 32 minutes) is an experimental film about five women who gather together to discuss about thinking of Hannah Arendt and to discuss the meaning they attach to the term "political".

Through this intellectual discussion and the monologues each of the women, they define the image of a political individual and a political woman: What does 'political' mean? How to define 'womanly political'? Is it possible to attain a revolutionism that transcends generations and redefine 'political'?

In the work speech is divided into different forms: reading out loud, simultaneous reading, Brechtian dialogue and monologue. These forms of speech include public and individual, even intimate language. A language that defines the work to a large extent both visually and auditively is the sign language. Although the work is characterized by a pluralistic discussion, the emphasis of the work lies on its visual and auditive aspects instead of narration.

Background

ENTHUSIAST:

First we have to define the word itself – Political.

ACTRESS:

What is Political? (Kokko 2010, 1 min 10 sec)

The origin of the film is following: In the autumn 2005 I organized an open reading circle at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art. The gatherings at the seminar room were called Experience and Reflection. It was a series of public lectures and discussions, open for everybody. Key note speakers were presenting an article or a chapter of a book that was given to the participants in forehand. I myself was presenting a chapter of the book *The Unavowable Community* (Blanchot, 2002). In our meetings there was among 10 to 15 participants at a time.

Later, in the autumn 2006, I hosted a Hannah Arendt Reading Circle at my home in Katajanokka, Helsinki. I was suggesting that we gather together around the book *Human Condition* (Arendt, 2002) and that we'll meet every month. We divided the book in four parts. One could present a chapter that interests one the most.

I got very excited about the book. The thinking of Hannah Arendt's was such a consolation for me! Finally I was reading a philosopher that could write understandable sentences, who was writing philosophy like a poet and who had a real human interest in the world in us, between us and around us. I had a particular interest in the meaning of the word politics but also in the vision of a so called political image. Why we think that the most political image is an image of a demonstration? Hannah Arendt never mentioned the word politics in her book *Human Condition*.

Although all the participators in our reading circle were and are career orientated women. We never managed to gather together all four of us. For example, one of the participants did not like what Arendt was writing in terms of feminism, was against her thoughts and did not have interest to continue our meetings with this particular writer. After four meetings I felt frustrated because I could not share my thoughts and energy that I got from her thinking the way I wanted.

Writing a manuscript

ENTHUSIAST:

Sometimes I have the impression that if there were no Islamism or prostitution, we Westerners would have nothing to really wonder about or publicly disapprove of anymore. Nor nothing to defend.

ANNIKKI:

That's not true. Even if family violence doesn't happen to be an issue for you, it doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. (Kokko 2010, 4 min 58 sec)

The situation described in the former chapter is dealing in general that what happens for me very often in the artistic process: I have a need to share something that I have found and that I feel important. In this case I decided to write discussions that were not real, discussions that never happened. Some of them were inspired of thinking of Arendt, some of them had nothing to do with her, being issues that I needed to write down. I was thinking some of the women participating in the reading circle that I hosted as type of characters, but mostly I was thinking of types or characters of human beings; just like we normally do when we write a play: what would be their interests in Arendt's thinking? How would they be reacting in the claims that Arendt made? What else could be important to talk about?

During my experiment with the two different reading circles I found an important fact what sometimes happen in a discussion where are more than two people included. Often happens that there is as many readers as participants and every participant has her own point of. This will also reflect to the discussion: we do not share the particular and the same interest. This is why we often speak not to each other but by each other. We give a speech to underline the fact where our interest is.

In the manuscript this remark or founding led to fictional discussions where the sentences and people do not meet but speak parallel. Because it did differ from the "normal" play it wasn't often so easy to accept for the actors. In the movie the characters are not answering even if one of them is asking but continuing their own point of view of thought.

For the manuscript I was reading three books by Hannah Arendt: *Human Condition* (Arendt, 2002), the only fiction she wrote, *Rahel Varnagen* and *Was ist Politik*. I was searching the articles written in Finnish of Arendt. I found articles by Markku Koivunen and took part in his basic lecture of thinking of Arendt at the Helsinki University. I also read articles by Tuija Pulkkinen, who is the leading Arendt reader in Finland. One question that I was pointed out was if Arendt was pointing out the gender or not in her writings. Well, she did not and this fact is written also in the script.

To learn about Aristotelian dialogue more, I took part to a one-day-seminar organized by the philosopher Marja-Liisa Kakkuri-Knuuttila at the Helsinki School of Economics, department of philosophy.

When I started to write a manuscript I knew exactly who I would like to act in my reading circle: Netta Keski-Levijoki, Annikki Yrjänäinen, Amira Khalifa and Janina Berman. I started to write sentences to these four actors and created four different types of characters: an actress, a student, an enthusiast and an elderly lady.

Picture 1: Simultaneous reading in The Reading Circle



Roles, characters and monologues

STUDENT (sign language):

When I traveled to Belfast, I was told: Don't wear green. Then you won't look like a foreigner and they may shoot you. However, during the journey they often took me for an Irishwoman, because I was talking English all the time. (Kokko, 2010, 8 min 54 sec.)

The woman acting the role of a student, Netta Keski-Levijoki, is a former student of mine from Turku Academy of Arts. When I met her in 2007 she was the first deaf person I ever had a contact with. I have to say I was fascinated by the interaction. To speak with a deaf person was for me a type a communication that I had to think the meanings of talk and speech again. Netta was always with two woman interpreters, students both of her own age. I was talking to interpreters when I wanted to say something.

During my glass in Turku Arts Academy we were writing a typical literature exercises, where the writer write the same text from two different point of views: as a first-person narrator and as an omniscient narrator. I was later editing the exercise Netta wrote during the glass. The first-person narrator appears is in the film as her own monologue, the interpreter speaks as a voice of an omniscient narrator.

Not every deaf person has, but Netta has an ability to use her voice while she is talking. When I asked her if she knew about it she said that she don't recognize when it is heard. I had the feeling that when she talks it sounds like singing, she sounds like a soprano. This is one reason why I felt the work is more auditive than narrative.

Among the sign language culture it is not good to point out the interpreter or to take her into account as a personality because the interpreter is reflecting the personality of the

deaf speaker, she should not be f.ex in the camera. It is also good if the interpreter is about the same age than the actual speaker.

The interpreter Alina Kulo is a friend of the Actress Amira Khalifa and during that time she was studying to be an interpreter. From the school she was told not to be in the camera even if I ask her to be (because I said I would like to experiment to play with the role interpreter). The other interpreter, Pirjo Falk, who was present in the rehearsals and during the shootings was refusing to be in the front of the camera because of this cultural reason mentioned above.

ACTRESS:

Oh what it means to be an actress? Well, let's take an example, say, planting a tree. Whereas a writer is able to describe in his book, for example, how a man goes to an open moor, a no-man's-land and plants tree seeds there, and he describes, how the man waters them and how, little by little, the seeds grow into a big forest. Almost as if in secret forest turns into a paradise. Who owns the paradise – the writer may ask. As an actor, on the other hand, it makes no sense to me to show that there is a tree that grows. An actor is himself a tree that sways and grows. Or then an actor just plants that tree in order to verify what happens. (Kokko, 2010, 16 min 48 sec)

I wrote a part for an actress by thinking what acting means for me. I took the writer example from the book *The man who planted trees* (Giono, 1994). Amira Khalifa is a former model, actress and soon a therapeutic and after our discussions and readings I added also a therapeutical point of view to the manuscript.

ENTHUSIAST:

At my childhood home we didn't really talk about politics. When one had to vote, my parents voted for the socialists, because in their opinion they had helped the jews the most. Each time Hitler's picture was shown on TV my father spitted and damned him. (Kokko, 2010, 7 min 3 sec)

Actress Janina Berman is an actress who I was already in my other video, the *Stakeout* (Kokko, 2007). I was searching a woman to my video and I found out that she has done as her thesis to Theatre Academy a monologue of a play, which was one of my favorite monologues. It is a play called *Rose* by Martin Sherman and I saw it for the first time in Finnish by Anneli Mäkelä (I cannot remember the year, maybe 2000).

ELDERLY LADY:

I have been to a demonstration twice. At both occasions against the Iraq war. My first demonstration was in Helsinki on 15.12.2003. We were some 15 000 demonstrators back then. The second time was in Merrida, Spain, on March 20th 2003, the very day the USA attacked Iraq. (Kokko, 2010, 27 min 24 sec)

I met Annikki Yrjänäinen when I was 23-years old and became a member to L.Onerva club, where she was the chairman. We also used to go swim for many years at the same

time on Mondays at Yrjönkatu swimhall, where Annikki was making her exercises in the sauna, later shown in the video too.

By telling these facts about the monologues I will underline the personalities of the actors and also the politics of the individuality. Every so called gathering in the movie has a monologue of each personality.

Making of

We shot the film in 1,5 days at my home in Katajanokka in January 2009. Cameraman was Matin Jäger, sound was by Samy Kramer and lighting by Eero Lämsä. I was editing the film for three months.

Picture 2: Shootings on Saturday at Vyökätku 9 B 10a



References

- Arendt, H (2002) : Vita Activa – Ihmisenä olemisen ehdot. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Arendt, H (1964): Rahel Varnagen.: *Lebensgeschichte einer deutschen Jüdin aus der Romantik*. München: Piper.
- Arendt H (1993): Was ist Politik? Fragmente aus dem Nachlaß. München: Piper.
- Blanchot, M (2004): Tunnustamaton Yhteisö. Transl. Janne Kurki and Panu Minkkinen. Helsinki: Loki-kirjat.
- Giono, J (1994): Mies joka istutti puita. Transl. Tuukka Kangasluoma. Saarijärvi: Basam Books.
- Kokko, J (2010): The Reading Circle. Lukupiiri. HD-Video, 32 min.
- Pulkkinen, T (1997): Poliitikka ihmisten välissä. Hannah Arendtin maailma. Article published in Tiede ja edistys 1/97.

http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amira_Khalifa

http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janina_Berman