

## **From personality cult figure to camp image – the case of President Urho Kekkonen**

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### **Abstract**

Former Finnish President Urho Kekkonen (1900-1986) has two debated monuments in Finland. The debates surrounding these monuments contain intense rhetoric which indicates a particular sentiment towards Kekkonen. This attitude is described in the article in terms of cultic discourse. During the first monument project at the end of the 1980s, Kekkonen was still broadly seen as an official political icon, which was approached through personality cultic discourse. The second monument was executed in 2000 after large critical debates over the Kekkonen era and his persona. As a result of these debates, the cultic discourse transformed its traits – Kekkonen was consciously seen as a mythological figure whose features could be exaggerated, ironized and turned into hilarious stories. In the postmodern atmosphere of the turn of the millennium, the figure of Kekkonen was even aestheticized as camp. This article explains how the cultic discourse about Kekkonen has changed in Finland during the past two decades.

**Keywords:** personality cult, cultic discourse, camp, monument, Urho Kekkonen, Finland

### **Cultic discourse in monument debates**

Erecting a monument for the commemoration of a person is a practice which frequently produces public discussions on the meanings of the monument. Sometimes the monuments even cause severe debates, in which people are only seemingly talking about the monument or the formal qualities of it, and in fact, through these debates much 'deeper' juxtapositions in society come to the surface. On a 'deeper' level, discussion and debates on monuments are often discussions on values, different interpretations of history, 'right' and 'wrong' memories, morals, identity and, especially, discussions on power – who in society has the power to define decent values, correct interpretations of history, 'right' memories, proper morality and

who we are? Often monuments function as channels for drawing out social friction on these issues. The frictions are particularly strong when they include discourse which can be described as cultic, as monument debates often do. In this article I will focus on cultic discourses in two monument debates which arose from monument projects for a former Finnish President – Urho Kekkonen (1900-1986). The first monument was unveiled in 1990 in Kajaani, where Kekkonen was born. The second was unveiled in 2000, in the Finnish capital city of Helsinki. Both of these monuments evoked intense public debates, which were however, very different from one other.

The empirical material of the article, including texts on the monuments published in several Finnish newspapers and magazines, was collected from libraries and several Finnish archives (Central Art Archives of Finnish National Gallery, Prime Minister's Office Archives and Kajaani City Archives). The aim of the material collection has been to find all published texts on the monuments. The data related to the first monument project consists of 284 pieces of text, and the second consists of 187 pieces. The largest part of the material is formed by news texts and letters to the editor in local, regional and national newspapers. The speakers in the texts represent several positions such as journalists, art critics, artists, officials, politicians from different parties, and so-called lay people. The voice of artists, officials, politicians and 'lay people' is present in the texts both as self-written opinions and as edited statements in interviews made by journalists. By 'lay people' I refer to people who do not have any public position in cultural or social fields and who do not belong to any of the previously mentioned categories. Besides the empirical material mentioned above, the points of view in the article rely on texts which were published during the monument projects but which, instead of the monument, focus mainly on Kekkonen. These texts form a larger social context for analysing the meaning-making processes in the monument debates.

The newspapers have an essential role in the research of public discussions in Finland. The press has had, and still has, a profoundly strong position in the country. Newspapers are read carefully and regularly. Even though the time used for general reading has diminished in the last decades, the time spent daily on reading newspapers among Finnish readers has not varied significantly (Hujanen 2001: 38). Previous research on Finnish media behaviour has shown that still in 2000, daily newspapers reached 86 % of Finnish residents aged 12 to 69 – considerably greater coverage in comparison to television, radio or magazines (Wiio & Nordenstreng 2001: 14). Throughout the monument projects of Kekkonen, the press seems to have been the largest forum in which people could take part in interactive public discussion. Because of the strong position of the press, the texts published in newspapers have often caused reactions and action both on the popular and institutional levels of society. In addition, the debates of Kekkonen's monument projects caused public declarations, political action as

well as an active and vast exchange of opinions, which reveal for example, discursive formations of cultic attitudes towards the president.

The press also efficiently produces supposed public opinion. Letters to the editor and published Gallup polls in newspapers effortlessly establish a myth of common public opinion as an additive sum of individual views. Pierre Bourdieu has written on a produced consensus effect in the formation of so-called public opinion: the impression of public opinion legitimates certain political action and at the same time makes it possible (Bourdieu 1993: 150-151). In the Kekkonen monument debates, many of the politicians and lay people took the published opinions in the press as expressions of the existing public opinion. Thus, it gave them reason and 'right' to take part in the debate and try to influence the progress of the monument projects.

During the decade between the erections of the monuments of Kekkonen, various kinds of changes in cultural, political and social atmosphere have occurred both in Finland and in the larger international scene. These changes have had an effect on the views and representations of Kekkonen as a 'Great Man'. Thus, the debates reflect a change in attitudes towards Kekkonen, which has occurred in Finland from the end of the 1980s through to this millennium. I define this change as a change of cultic relation towards Kekkonen. The aim of this article is to demonstrate this change and explain how cultic discourse takes on differing tones in changing social and cultural contexts.

The discursive approach to monument debates enables the analysis of meaning-making processes, as well as the construction of meanings, such as cultic meanings of Kekkonen. The theoretical background of the article arises from approaches of social constructionism which emphasize reality as constructions produced in language, interaction and social practices. In social constructionism, language is not just an instrument in communication, but is seen as producing, justifying and changing practices in reality (Shotter 1993: 6-10, 99-101; Gergen 1999). Discourse studies as a method, relies on the theoretical background of social constructionism. Even though discourse studies include several different orientations, a common point of view is in the emphasis placed on the constructed character of social entities, relations and phenomena. In the analysis, some discourses are seen to produce one version of reality, while some others produce another version (Fairclough 1992a: 3-4). Critical emphasis in discourse analysis stresses linguistic choices as a use of power (Foucault 1972; Fairclough 1992b: 8-9; 2001: 36-63). In this article I will define discourse as a particular way of representing reality. These representations which are expressed in monument debates, construct the monuments, events, concepts, memories, identities and aspects related to them in a complex way. These representations also indicate the power positions and hierarchies which are intertwined in language use and meaning-making processes.

In discourse studies, the concept of text usually refers to a larger category than just spoken and written communication. It can be understood in the broader Barthesian sense to also contain visual representations, objects and other meaningful 'language' (Barthes 1973). Norman Fairclough has even used the concept of semiosis instead of text in his theory of discourse analysis to emphasise the complex and manifold character of meaningful expressions or 'language' (Fairclough, Jessop & Sayer 2003; Fairclough 2004a; Fairclough 2004b: 112). In this article, a discursive approach is used for analysing the empirical material. This material consists of published texts written in several genres, pictures, caricature drawings and different kinds of cultural products which have been inspired by Kekkonen's persona. All of these representations and expressions, in addition to their communicative use, are perceived as contributing to the production of discourse.

The concept of cult is defined profoundly differently in different research orientations. However, it is often used relating to highly emotional, enthusiastic and socially charged content regarding a public person or cultural product and devotion to a phenomenon – possibly even in a fanatic manner (Saresma & Kovala 2003: 9; Kovala 2003: 189). Cultic attitude in personality cults is noticeably socially different to cultic attitude towards products and phenomena in popular culture. The starting points of personality cults are usually in 'top-down' produced structures and ideology, as well as in political action in which objects of admiration are offered and constructed for the people. Unlike political personality cults, cultic cultural phenomena are often marginalised from mainstream culture and even take on a kind of counter position to it – as demonstrated for example in cultic literature (Kovala 2003: 191). However, the common features of cultic attitudes towards a person or a cultural product are unquestioning admiration, in addition to the experience of belonging to and identifying with a particular group (Saresma & Kovala 2003: 10).

Seeing cultic features in monument debates depends on how we understand the concept of cult. Instead of stressing cults as social phenomena, in this article I will discuss cults and cultic features as discursive phenomena, which are expressed in texts and language use. The approach transfers the focus of the research to linguistic and discursive aspects in cultic meaning-making processes. This kind of approach has been used, for example by Péter Dávidházi when writing about cultic reception and cultic ways of using language (Dávidházi 2002: 8-21). In his views, cultic language use or cultic discourse forms an essential component in cults as a social practice. According to Dávidházi, cultic language is characterised by preference for such glorifying statements as those which can be neither (empirically) verified nor falsified, use of religious or quasi-religious metaphors and similes, as well as transcendental expressions (Dávidházi 2002: 8, 17). In this article, cultic discourse is seen in terms of Dávidházi. The research of cults is an interdisciplinary study field which has

traditionally belonged to the interests of anthropologists. However, cults have also been researched in the fields of history, cultural studies, psychology, media studies and political science. In the fields of history and political science interests have focused on the research of personality cults of political leaders. Particularly, the totalitarian leaders of the past century in Europe in addition to the practices of creating as well as maintaining their position and image have been explored in recent studies (eg. Apor, Behrends, Jones & Rees 2005). In cultural and media studies, the interests have centered on communal cultural practices and creation of cults in popular culture, such as fandom (eg. Harris & Alexander 1998; Lewis 1992; Kovala & Haverinen forthcoming). This article combines the points of view of researching historical personality cults and cultic cultural practices. Additionally, the article highlights the research of cults in the field of art history by using art historical concepts and understanding as well as artworks themselves, as a basis of the study.

#### **Collision of personality cultic discourse and critical views**

President Urho Kekkonen (Agrarian League, later Centre Party) has been a greatly discussed figure in Finnish society during the last decades. Public discussions on the president and the phases of his era have been analysed, criticised, supported and researched on the academic, political and popular levels of Finnish society. Kekkonen was a charismatic leader of the state for four presidential terms, from 1956 to 1981. This period of time saw a number of political and social phenomena, such as rapid economic growth and Finlandization, Kekkonen's presidency and his persona in Finnish social memory. The image of Kekkonen was produced, formulated and controlled during the years of his life, and particularly in his later presidential terms. Negative representations of him were suppressed and positive ones stressed by several media forums, his supporters, his office and himself (eg. Paavinsalo 1995: 102-109, 189-190; Tuikka 2007: 311-319, 345-346, 360-361). Besides the suppressed critique, Kekkonen also faced open adoration. Thus, we might say that there was some kind of political personality cult of Kekkonen that emerged in Finland during the years of his life. This personality cult was fostered and strengthened by the people who shared a common political background to Kekkonen. Part of the production of the personality cult was the telling of heroic stories about him and his actions along with making up benevolent jokes, where the president had the role of a clever and smart man of the people.

Kekkonen died on August 31st, 1986. Only three days after his death, the Finnish media started a public discussion on his commemoration. The opening of the discussion was published in the national newspaper, *Ilta-Sanomat*, on September 3rd, 1986. It was featured in a large article wherein ten well-known citizens from different societal sectors and ten people 'on the street' were interviewed. As a result, the newspaper article's title stated: "Man on the

street wants: a figurative statue" (*Ilta-lehti* 1986). Kajaani, the former home town of Kekkonen, soon decided to commemorate his life with a public monument and a public monument competition was launched shortly after Kekkonen's funeral. An abstract monument proposal made by sculptor Pekka Kauhanen was chosen as the winner by the monument committee. The monument proposal immediately caused an intensive public debate both in the local and national media. The debate reflected both the old personality cultic discourse, which still existed, and the more critical views of him, which were now after Kekkonen's death more openly drawn into public discussion. Thus, the monument project offered a channel for a public and politically attuned conversation from a seemingly cultural stand point.



Picture 1, Caption: Urho Kekkonen monument *The Great Era*, Pekka Kauhanen, 1990 Kajaani, bronze. Photo: Tuuli Lähdesmäki.

In the personality cultic discourse of the debate, Kekkonen's persona was depicted as a true hero, whose greatness was taken for granted and needed no justification. His deeds and characteristics were praised and seen in a sublime, idealistic and romanticized light. Even religious expressions were used in depicting his value. In the following letter to the editor extract, from the regional newspaper *Kainuun Sanomat* (Kajaani), Kekkonen was seen as fulfilling the will of God in international peace politics:

No earthly memorial can depict the task of that era, because it was so big, difficult and unique. To us Finns, one very difficult thing was taught back then and it was this: Do not hate but love your neighbour nations. There too lives similar people as us, thus the word of God teaches: bless, not curse. This was exactly the secret, which was the task of Kekkonen. God had commanded to him this great task of making peace with the neighbour nation. Urho Kekkonen couldn't have solved this task only with the power of his own. He was just a man, but sure he could ask wisdom and power from the God. (Pseudonyme Ei riitaa 1989.) [1]

Even though Kekkonen was depicted in the discourse as an admired hero, the discourse was not totally denying all the critique towards him. However, when there were any negative or arguable features to be seen in him, they were presented as necessary for achieving greater purposes.

In the personality cultic discourse surrounding the abstract monument, the writers were profoundly dissatisfied with the sculpture. People even went as far as to consider it a mockery of Kekkonen, his supporters and even the entire nation. In the following extract of a letter to the editor from the regional newspaper *Kaleva* (Oulu), the monument proposal is seen to offend the public opinion of the Finnish nation:

In this case choosing this work as a memorial is more twisted than the leg of the work. The nation-wide beloved and appreciated, upstanding – though not crooked-legged – former president Kekkonen is getting a vacillated-legged and vase imitating monster memorial. In this case, the choice of Kajaani's decision-makers offends the public opinion of the Finnish nation. (Pseudonyme Ali-setä 1989.)

According to the views of personality cultic discourse, Kekkonen should have been commemorated with a figurative statue depicting his outward appearance in a heroic manner, or in some romanticized action usually attached to his persona, such as fishing, skiing or doing traditional physical work. In the following letter to the editor extract taken from *Kainuun*

*Sanomat*, the writer wants Kekkonen's figure to be depicted realistically in the monument. In the text, the writer gives his own romanticized proposal in which Kekkonen is depicted in the midst of traditional log-rafting. Log-rafting was an important source of income for many men and was a central local industry in Kajaani during the years of Kekkonen's youth. It also has strong symbolic meaning in the region's culture:

The Great Man Kekkonen lived most of his study years in Kajaani. He lived and adopted his friendly attitude towards lay people with lumberjacks and people. Thus, we need a monument in which Kekkonen is standing with a log hook leaning on his shoulder and a thought being cast from his head to the end of the log hook as though it were a bolt of lightning. In his left hand would be an open book, because the poor student has to read even when working. A shining light would imitate the thunder or thought. This entity would be on a pedestal which would depict rapids in which logs would seem to be floating on the ripples of water. (Kinnunen 1989.)

Although Kekkonen was perceived in the personality cultic discourse as a national hero or as a Great Man, he was also depicted as a kind of father figure or a friend known to everyone. Even in press news items he was referred to by familiar nicknames. This kind of rhetoric emphasized Kekkonen's character as a kind of 'Father of the Nation', increasing his cultic position.

Personality cultic discourse was particularly strong in the local and regional newspapers published in the northern part of Finland. However, the newspapers in the south published also letters to the editor which followed the rhetoric of the discourse. Besides the letters to the editor, the discourse was followed in many columns, causeries and interviews of politicians and so-called lay people. In particular, many older people who shared leftist or Central Party-related ideology, used personality cultic discourse in their comments. Thus, the political world view, generation and geographical location had an effect on the production of the discourse. In the views of the discourse, the Great Men needed to be remembered by heroic figurative monuments. The ideas of proper and heroic monuments in the discourse followed the traditions and conventions of monument sculpture dating back to the 19th century.

Speakers of the personality cultic discourse positioned themselves and their points of view in the debate above the people who had critical or neutral views of Kekkonen. The rhetoric in the discourse often included uncompromising expressions in which other kinds of views were seen as wrong, absurd or dismissive of Kekkonen. Speakers of the personality cultic discourse saw everyone who had critical views towards Kekkonen as opponents in the debate. Even the supporters of the abstract monument proposal could be seen as opponents

of Kekkonen.

Thus, the personality cultic discourse clashed with views in which Kekkonen's persona and era were not seen in an uncritical light. Quite the contrary, Kekkonen's presidency was seen in these critical views as an era of a political power game, undemocratic decision-making and Finlandization of the society. In these critical views, the abstract monument served as an instrument to bring out analytical critique of Kekkonen. The form of the monument was, for example, interpreted as hinting towards Kekkonen's twisted character and his tendency to do politics in a construed way. The following opinion is an extract from the regional newspaper *Pohjolan Sanomat* (Kemi). The opinion was included in an article on the basis of newspaper readers' telephone calls:

Mikko Oinonen from Kemi thinks that the sculpture is otherwise good, but the name of it is wrong. A good name for the sculpture would absolutely be "The Great Crooked" [2]. This way the statue would clarify the life path of Kekkonen from the strong beginning to the political and diplomatic corruption and to the clarification and sobering of old age. (Korhonen 1989.)

The critical interpretations which showed the president in a negative light were brought up in newspapers' letters to the editor and in articles whereby so-called lay people were interviewed. In a changing political and social atmosphere the criticism towards Kekkonen was more openly expressed and published in local and national media.

Even though the disagreement in the debate arose from different interpretations and views on Kekkonen's political actions, the political disagreement was often discussed in the debate through the artistic and aesthetic questions of the monument. The debate was polarised between views in which the abstract form was accepted and views in which a heroic figurative monument was demanded. In general, this kind of polarisation between abstraction and figuration has been a typical starting point for art debates in the 20th century. Modern art with its strive for simplified, deformed and abstract expression has also widened the distinction between the different kinds of art audiences. Particularly the distinction in the views and tastes of so-called art experts and non-art experts, or lay people, has been polarised. (Bourdieu 1984; Burstow 1989: 472; Gamboni 1997: 132-133, 155, 170.)

The demands for a heroic figurative monument in the first Kekkonen monument debate were uncomfortable for the art experts and some culturally-orientated politicians of the time. This was due to the political connotations of such monuments. For art experts and culturally-orientated politicians, a heroic monumental figurative form connoted socialist realism and

monuments erected in socialist countries. This kind of politicization of form had influenced the western understanding of the visuality of public sculpture for decades. The influential American modernist art critic Clement Greenberg formulated this kind of distinction in western art criticism already in the 1930s – abstraction was linked to the free West and figuration to the suppressed totalitarianism of the East (Greenberg 1939). Since then, the politicization of form has influenced the connotations of public sculpture of the ‘East’ and ‘West’, even though the production of figurative or abstract art has not been bound in practice to the political systems of societies (Burstow 1989: 483; Gamboni 1997: 129-130; Benton 2004: 2). Because of connotations of the figurative form, monumental abstraction was seen as the only proper monument style for Kekkonen in the eyes of the art field of the time – a figurative monument would possibly have stigmatized Finland as a socialistic society in the views of other countries. Even during the preparations of the second Kekkonen monument project in Helsinki, these kinds of views were brought up in public. For example, the head of the monument committee, former Prime Minister Harri Holkeri, stated in an interview in the national newspaper *Ilta-Sanomat* that “in his opinion there is only one figurative monument in Finland, which he is for and that is the equestrian statue of Marshal Mannerheim” (*Ilta-Sanomat* 1995). Holkeri had held the main speech in the celebrations of the unveiling of the Kekkonen monument in Kajaani. In 1995, the Prime Minister’s Office asked him to chair the new monument committee of Kekkonen. In the *Ilta-Sanomat* interview, Holkeri commented on the question of the forthcoming monument’s form as follows:

Holkeri poses three criteria for the forthcoming monument:

- It has to be good art, it has to be related to Kekkonen and it has to take into account its place next to Finlandia Hall. Not just anything can be located on this site.

Holkeri presumes that Kekkonen would not necessarily have wanted a figurative monument.

- I have an impression that he was horrified over the idea that the statue would be placed next to other statues in a sort of horror gallery.

Holkeri got confirmation for his views in his recent visit to Hungary.

- There they had transferred the statues of the command art of the soviet time to separate parks, which were quite astonishing. This tells something of the direction of art, towards which we should not go. (*Ilta-Sanomat* 1995.)

Overall, sensitivity towards political connotations of the figurative monuments was reflected in

the typical Finnish fear of being seen as a socialist or former soviet state in the eyes of western foreigners (Lähdesmäki 2007, 213-214, 307-308).

In the personality cultic discourse, in which the figurative monument was emphatically demanded, the figurative form was not understood in a politicised way. An interesting example of this comes from the reception of another Kekkonen monument – Finnish folk artist, Matias Keskinen’s huge sculptured monumental portrait of Kekkonen created in 1984. The portrait was situated on a private piece of land in the small town of Vuolijoki, near Kajaani. In the personality cultic discourse Keskinen’s sculpture was seen as an honour to Kekkonen without any political connotations of socialism. For example, in the following extract of a letter to the editor from *Kainuun Sanomat*, the writer sees Keskinen’s sculpture as a good example of a presidential monument:

President Kekkonen was a president of the nation. Let the nation decide what kind of statue the statue of the president should be. Do it for instance of bronze, marble or granite, but do it looking like President Kekkonen! Though, we and our children would say: “It is President Kekkonen”. This is what the children say when we pass the village of Vuolijoki and all think warmly about the great president. (Pseudonyme “Vuolijoellako patsas kansalle ja Kajaanissa herroille” 1989.)

However, art experts and some officials and politicians interpreted the same portrait in a very different way. For example, when the portrait was exhibited in the city centre of Oulu in 1989 at the same time as president of the Soviet Union Mihail Gorbatshev visited the town, the mayor of Oulu ordered the sculpture and another of Keskinen’s statues of Kekkonen to be moved from the eyes of the international press. This was for the reason that it might have given them an embarrassing image of the town. The mayor explained the decision in an interview to the national newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* as follows:

The need for explanations for the international press, which the statues would have produced, is so hopeless, that we do not want to take that risk. One might just guess how the statues of Kekkonen would have been interpreted in the world’s press. In Finland, this has already caused a noted media event. (*Helsingin Sanomat* 1989.)

In general, figurative sculpture, which was seen as referring to socialist realism or the personality cult, was regarded as a very negative phenomenon in the Finnish art field at the end of the 1980s and in the beginning of the 1990s. For example, the public sculpture called *World Peace*, which was a gift from the city of Moscow to the city of Helsinki and erected in Helsinki in 1990, was very heavily criticised and slated by the art experts because of its

socialist realist idealism. For example, an art critic in the national newspaper *Uusi Suomi* stated in the title of his critical commentary: “Not worth offering to Hungary, East-Germany, Poland or Romania. Kirjuhin’s monument will only do for Finland” (Routio 1990).



Picture 2, Caption: *Portrait of Urho Kekkonen*, Matias Keskinen, 1984 Vuolijoki, concrete.  
Photo: Heikki Hanka.



Picture 3, Caption: *The World Peace*, Oleg Kirjuhin, 1990 Helsinki, bronze. Photo: Tuuli Lähdesmäki.

Thus, the Kekkonen monument project in Kajaani reflected political contradictions towards the president – on one hand the personality cultic discourse, and on the other hand the heavy criticism. The monument project in Kajaani can even be seen as an opening to broader political debate over the Kekkonen era in Finland. Kekkonen became a heavily discussed figure in Finland at the same time as political contradictions were eased in Europe at the turn of the decade and in the beginning on the 1990s. Finlandization was also critically discussed in Finnish media during this time period.

### **Nostalgic and ironic return to Kekkonen**

The second monument project of Kekkonen started five years after the monument in Kajaani was erected. The second project was part of a larger monument project in which the Prime Minister's Office purchased monuments to commemorate the three Finnish presidents whose monuments were still lacking in the capital city. Kekkonen's monument was the last of these projects. The monument proposal was chosen through a public competition. The monument committee chose an environmental artwork designed by sculptor Pekka Jylhä as the winning proposal.

The monument project of Kekkonen in Helsinki proceeded in a very different kind of political and cultural atmosphere to the one in Kajaani. The discussions about the past decades had brought new openness to the political atmosphere of the country. After the economic crisis in the beginning of the 1990s, the state's economy started to grow again on the basis of the fast development of information technology. The crisis, which was partly due to the collapse of foreign trade with the Soviet Union, as well as managing the crisis, changed the history of the former economic and political ties with the Soviet Union. Additionally, reforms in the Finnish constitution after Kekkonen's death had an effect on the political atmosphere of the 1990s. The reforms increased the power of Parliament and the Prime Minister at the expense of the president.

Thus, in the second monument project of Kekkonen the personality cultic discourse played a much smaller role than in the first one. The positive enthusiasm towards him had subsided in the decade after his death. The most eager supporters, who had personally experienced Kekkonen's most powerful years, were also getting older. This perhaps had an effect on the marginalizing position of the personality cultic discourse. The heavy criticism of Kekkonen had also softened by the end of the decade and the second monument did not give rise to any aggressive interpretations of him. If some critical interpretations were made, they were expressed in a more or less humorous sense. For example, the columns in the monument

and the hands at the end of the columns were often ironically perceived as the protecting or blessing hands of Kekkonen, or God, as for instance, art critic Dan Sundell interpreted the monument (Sundell 1997; 2000). The whole monument project in Helsinki was perhaps not taken as seriously as the first one and the discussions generated by the monument were not as contradictory as ten years earlier.



Picture 4, Caption: Urho Kekkonen monument *Spring*, Pekka Jylhä, 2000 Helsinki, bronze, water pool and granite. Photo: Tuuli Lähdesmäki.

The easing of the contradictions in the monument project can be linked to the more general cultural views, which became common in Finland during the 1990s. These cultural views are usually described in terms of the concept of postmodernism. During the 1990s many ideas and views related to postmodernism were adopted in general everyday cultural discussion (Lähdesmäki 2007: 25-26). So-called Grand Narratives were questioned, national myths were deconstructed and traditional heroes were ironized in cultural discussion, art and media. Due to this, the monument sculpture as a genre lost some of its previous prestige.

Attitudes towards monument sculpture and personality cults in general were also changing

due to world politics. In the beginning of the 1990s the Finnish media followed the demolishing and displacement of the heroic monuments in former socialistic countries with great interest. In the Finnish media these monuments were often approached with humour and even treated as camp; as artefacts whose clumsiness were ironically admired because of the bad taste that they were seen to represent (Sontag 1987: 105-110). As Susan Sontag has observed, camp is a cultural phenomenon which is always consumed or performed “in quotation marks” (Sontag 1987: 109). This kind of consuming of culture was introduced to Finnish newspapers and art magazines, for example in 1993 when writer and academic Paavo Haavikko purchased a monument of Stalin from Estonia and placed in his backyard. The monument featured Stalin hanging his coat over his arm, thus Haavikko renamed the statue ironically as the monument of coat turners (*Helsingin Sanomat* 1993). In Finland, a similar kind of interest in quotations marks was focused towards socialist realist art and products of soviet propaganda.

Several art exhibitions in Finland displayed socialist realism and socialist related objects during the mid-1990s. The point of departure for several exhibitions was to treat the exhibition objects with irony. For example, in an international exhibition called Monumental Propaganda, 150 artists from Russia, the USA, Canada and various European countries exhibited ironic proposals in terms of how to recycle the communist symbols and monuments which were pulled down in the former socialist countries. Several art critics and other cultural journalist in Finnish newspapers approached the proposals with humour and camp attitude. The idea of the exhibition was linked in some articles to Finnish monuments of Great Men. For example, in the regional newspaper *Aamulehti*, a critic made the following suggestion: “What should we do with the old soviet monuments? 150 artists around the world thought about the reuse of Lenin and Stalin statues. The ideas could also be useful in another country of dull monuments – in Finland.” (Tuominen 1997).

At the same time, alongside the second Kekkonen monument project, people were debating in the Finnish press about purchasing a monument of Lenin for Helsinki. The idea of purchasing an old Lenin monument from Russia or Estonia and erecting it in Lenin Park, Helsinki, originated from a private initiative of a Helsinki resident. The project was supported especially by some art critics and art experts from the art museum field, who took the project as camp humour – the art experts were not worried about generating an inappropriate image of Finland as a former socialist country. For example, an ironic article about the project in *Helsingin Sanomat* was titled: “The park calls for Lenin!” The art critic commented on the project and the idea of placing a small Lenin monument in Lenin Park in the article as follows:

The Lenin of Helsinki could represent softer park values. Lenin Park in Kallio would be an excellent place for a small statue. The beautifully rising

rocks, slate stone stairs, several rear rock plants and pine species create beauty of contrasts to the scenery. Rough and soft, rise and fall, stone and grass, high and low is intertwining in the harmony of the park architecture. But green would long for some red as a counter effect, growing nature some marks of human hand. Thus, the park is actually calling for Lenin! The portrait of Lenin of red granite is like made for the Lenin Park! (Moring 2000.)

In 1999, the Helsinki City Museum board of directors gave permission for the museum to purchase the Lenin monument for its collection from a Russian businessman, who offered the museum an old Lenin monument. However, the deal was cancelled due to the businessman being no longer interested in selling the sculpture. Thus, in ten years what was considered to be embarrassing art had become a funny and light issue in the Finnish art field.

By the end of the 1990s, due to political changes in Europe and the spread of postmodernist views in art, figurative monuments as such were no longer heavily attached to political connotations as they had been during the beginning of the decade. Attitudes towards so-called Great Men had also changed – ‘Great Men’ as national heroes had lost their previous meaning in postmodernist culture, which questioned the basic structures and values of traditional cultural phenomena (Jameson 1984). All these political and cultural changes which occurred or strengthened during the 1990s had an influence on the second Kekkonen monument project, as well as on the interpretations of the monument and views of Kekkonen himself. In the second monument project, the personality cultic discourse and the critical approach softened and partly gave way to a new kind of discourse, which contained a new kind of mythology whereby the approach to Kekkonen was not especially serious. Yet, there was still curiosity in seeing him as a legendary leader – both good and bad. This new discourse was used particularly by journalists, politicians and art critics, as well as so-called lay people, who participated in the public discussion of the second Kekkonen monument. The use of the discourse indicated the acknowledgement of the history of Kekkonen’s era and its undemocratic features, in addition to phases of Finlandization. Thus, the use of the discourse reflected an atmosphere in which writers were no longer ashamed of past events. Further, the past and its events did not need to be explained. From criticism arising during the 1990s, the official myth or cult of Kekkonen had turned into a metamyth, a myth which was recognised in public as a myth. This kind of view was for instance, expressed in an editorial of the weekly magazine *Suomen Kuvalehti*, during the celebrations of the new monument and the anniversary of Kekkonen’s birthday:

The tones of the celebrations of Kekkonen are still those of moaning,

explaining and even defending. Old decision-makers in the celebrations of the House of the Estates in Helsinki brought out a fading trace of the history of UKK [3]. The fictive agent story by young writers about Kekkonen, who was changed to younger, depicts well the forthcoming time: UKK will be transformed from historical character to fictional material. Different representations can be formed from this material and fitted to a particular need and intuition. A myth, a glorious story of Gods, was generated from Kekkonen, and it is developing all the time in different directions. It is typical for these kinds of stories that the central figure is not only a national hero but also a sexual athlete, genius of economics, a great singer of his nation, and over and outside of the critique in good and in bad. [–] What is left for the artists is their own Kekkonen, who will not dry up as a source of inspiration and who hardly anyone will mix with the historical persona. His personality will inspire to ponder eternal questions on wretchedness, lust for power, rule, love and the revenge of man – everything from which the literature has drawn on from the time of antics. Additionally, Finland has its own hero, lion-hearted, on whom there will be more stories the more time goes on. (Ruokanen 2000.)

This myth of Kekkonen was also exaggerated in various columns and causeries during the second monument project, without any fear of being taken as serious adoration of him. This kind of benevolent humoristic rhetoric was much used during the second monument project, even at official occasions and in media texts. For example, in her speech during the unveiling ceremony of the Kekkonen monument in Helsinki, the head of town council compared Kekkonen to heroes of the Finnish national epic of Kalevala, who “had their own weaknesses and cruel features like all other human beings” and “who travelled through lands and the seas, built and created, but also fought and robbed and took maids as their brides and wives” (Rihtniemi 2000).

The reception of the second Kekkonen monument reflected the general change in public attitudes toward Kekkonen. At the turn of the millennium, myths of Kekkonen were also carried on in several cultural products, such as in fictive novels, as well as in a cabaret and a theatre play about him. A similar kind of play with history and fiction was also used in Matti Hagelberg’s award-winning cartoons, drawn during the beginning of the millennium and collected in a book in 2005. In Hagelberg’s cartoons, Kekkonen is pictured as a sort of ironic superman, who e.g.: as a child, floats in a basket on a river like Moses; gets swallowed by a whale, like Jonah; travels to the moon in the Apollo space shuttle; and rescues singer Alla Pugatshova in Soviet Union. The cultic discourse of Kekkonen seems to have been shifted to

another level in the beginning of the new millennium. As Helena Sederholm states, camp can be defined as an exaggeration of cultic attitude (Sederholm 2003, 166). This kind of exaggeration has started to characterize the cultic attitudes toward Kekkonen.

Even though the Grand Narratives and national myths have been criticized in postmodernism, history, past and tradition are present in the logic of postmodernism as nostalgia (Huysen 1993: 253; Jameson 1984). Thus, the relationship between postmodernism and the past, history and tradition is in a way quite paradoxical – on the one hand the relationship is deconstructive, and on the other it is nostalgic. This ambivalence can be seen in attitudes towards Kekkonen in Finland during the 1990s and in the new millennium. The nostalgic tone has especially marked the attitudes towards Kekkonen in recent years. The mythical figure of Kekkonen has become a sort of popular culture icon, which is besides nostalgic, attached to humour, irony and a camp attitude. Kekkonen's figure and face has been used in recent years in different kinds of popular culture imageries, which are not just the repetition of personality cultic discourse and not just criticism. The image of Kekkonen has been transformed into a trendy postmodernist icon which is being used in contemporary culture as a camp image. This kind of use of Kekkonen imagery seems to be the most popular among the culturally oriented people who have not yet reached their middle age. For them, Kekkonen has not necessarily represented a personally experienced political figure, but rather a historical figure mystified with stories in public memory. Thus, the camp attitude towards him or a camp interest in him is not similarly politically attuned as the previous personality cultic relation. As Sontag has noted, camp attitude is not political but rather focused on style instead of contents (Sontag 1987: 107). However, the camp attitude towards a politician can also be interpreted as a political act – whether conscious or unconscious.

Commercialised popular culture and its forums disseminate cultic phenomena efficiently in contemporary society (Saresma & Kovala 2003: 16-17). In this process, cult and camp attitude turn into products which can be used and consumed. In fact, camp requires commercialised popular culture and cultural products from which camp attuned consumers can choose what and how to consume (Sederholm 2003: 166). In the beginning of the 21st century the image of Kekkonen was also commercialised as a product. For example, different manufacturers in Finland have designed trendy t-shirts, caps and wristbands with the face of Kekkonen. These clothes have been popular among the urban youth and even some fashionable Finnish celebrities have worn them on TV. Kekkonen's iconic face has also been printed on an album cover of the Finnish humour rock band Sleepy Sleepers, who titled their hit collection after Kekkonen in 2003. Posters of Kekkonen have decorated a stage in a rock concert with the theme of Kekkonen. Kekkonen's face has been used as a mobile logo alongside other iconic faces, such as Lenin, Che Guevara, Marilyn Monroe and Jim Morrison. In addition, some Finnish companies have been inspired to use Kekkonen's figure for

commercial purposes in advertisements. For example, during recent years the Finnish mobile company TeleFinland has advertised their products by use of a superman figure, whose appearance resembles that of Kekkonen's. On some occasions, the image of Kekkonen has been aestheticized for the use of trends and fashion. For instance, in the Finnish trend magazine *Trendi*, the Kekkonen era was turned into a nostalgic retro trend for a wedding. An official portrait of Kekkonen was used in the fashion pictures as a trendy retro decoration. In the magazine, Kekkonen was even turned into a style. This kind of nostalgia and aesthetics was produced by and for the generation whose own experiences of Kekkonen came either from their childhood or from stories and images used and recycled in culture. For the new generation, views towards the political realism of Kekkonen were already a phase in the past and a chapter in history.



Picture 5, Caption: T-shirts with the face of Kekkonen in the museum shop of Kekkonen's home museum. Photo: Tuuli Lähdesmäki.

### **Changing cultic relations**

During the last twenty years, from the late-1980s to the present day, a complex change has occurred in cultic relations to Kekkonen in Finland. In this article I have described and explained the change through two monument projects of Kekkonen and the discussions these monument projects generated at the end of the 1980s, throughout the 1990s and in the beginning of the new millennium. During the first monument project in Kajaani at the end of the 1980s, Kekkonen was still broadly seen in public discussion as an official political icon. The monument, as well as Kekkonen's persona, was often interpreted using personality cultic discourse. However, among the art experts and some culturally-orientated politicians, the whole idea of erecting heroic monuments appeared to be a problematic gesture referring unwittingly to Eastern practices and socialist realism. Highly polarised views were especially generated through the relationship drawn between socialist realism and figurative sculptures of Kekkonen.

The second monument project in Helsinki was executed after large critical public debates had taken place regarding the Kekkonen era, his persona, and Finlandization. During the 1990s the contemporary art field also underwent changes, which at the same time reset monuments in a new light. In postmodernist discussions the 'Great Men' and the Grand Narratives were ironized and socialist realism was even seen as camp. In public discussions launched by the second monument project, the personality cultic discourse was barely visible. Instead, the cultic discourse of the president had transformed its traits – Kekkonen was consciously seen as a mythological figure whose features could be exaggerated, ironized and turned into hilarious stories. This change in cultic relations to Kekkonen can be interpreted as a shift from the political personality cult figure to a nostalgic camp image.

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### Notes

[1] All translations are by the writer.

[2] The writer uses the Finnish word *liero*, which means both a dew-worm and crooked.

[3] UKK is short for Urho Kaleva Kekkonen.

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