La Figure de la Terre (Film)

by Axel Straschnoy

CAST: PIERRE LOUIS MOREAU DE MAUPERTUIS (OSMO PEKONEN),
ANDERS CELSIUS (JOHAN STÉN)

REVIEW OF THE PREMIERE AT THE GALLERIA OF THE OLD STUDENT
HOUSE, HELSINKI, 1 APRIL 2015

REVIEWED BY MARY W. GRAY

La *Figure de la Terre* is a short (24 minutes) independent film by Axel Straschnoy celebrating the journey of the mathematician Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis in Finnish Lapland in 1736–1737 in search of evidence of the shape of the earth. The French king Louis XV sent one expedition to Lapland and another one, led by La Condamine, to present-day Ecuador to make arc-length measurements to support the Newtonian view of the earth's shape being like that of a tangerine in opposition to the Cassini view of a lemon-like earth. Maupertuis, together with Swedish astronomer Anders Celsius, was the first to succeed, and became enamored with Lapland.

Based on the account with the same name by Maupertuis, the film tracks the expedition, with Finnish historians of mathematics Osmo Pekonen (Maupertuis—see Figure 1) and Johan Stén (Celsius), accompanied by the harpsichord music of Rameau, selected and performed by Elina Mustonen. Although made with what might be described as very minimal production costs, the film creates the feeling of the far north spaces of Lapland as well as the milieu of eighteenth-century scientific exploration,

greatly enhanced by the music. It was a credible enactment, much appreciated by the audience, but no Oscar nominations are anticipated.

Another screening took place during the 2016 Bridges conference in Jyväskylä, Finland, 9–13 August 2016. For the trailer, see: <http://axel.straschnoy.com/tornea/>.

Figure 1. Osmo Pekonen, acting as Maupertuis, the man who flattened the Earth (A promotional picture from the archives of Osmo Pekonen.)

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