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feature article

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Towards sophistication: Exploring the 1930s Finnish cinema's 'French style'

ABSTRACT

During the second half of the 1930s, a particularly weighty aesthetic, called the 'French style', emerged in the Finnish film studios. With its expressionist lighting, in-depth staging and Dutch tilts, this style, inspired by French films, became one of the most characteristic and popular features of Finland's classical cinema. Drawing from existing scholarship on Finnish film studios, this article explores the conditions of transfer of this specific aesthetic from France to Finland and its impacts, highlighting the economic and technical conditions underpinning this aesthetic circulation. To do so, it examines the critical reception of French cinema in Finland and compares the sociocultural issues of the two countries in order to show that, more than a style, such influences are evidence of a production model that circulates from France to Finland.

KEYWORDS

Finland
France
aesthetics
film studios
transfer
reception
assimilation
production

In 1940, Finnish cinematographer Felix Forsman synthesized the principles of one of the most important film aesthetics in Finnish studio cinema:

The French school of style is – or rather was – a so-called effect style of cinematography: lights and shadow, but lights as little as possible

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1. Although this film's cinematographer is the Swede Albert Rudling, the fact that he was born in southern France and that he was Julius Jaenzon's first assistant cameraman on the Franco-Swedish film *Service de nuit (Night Shift)* (Frescourt 1932) suggests that the film may be best considered in the context of a collaboration between the French and Swedish studios in the early 1930s. Further research is needed on this transnational collaboration and in particular the role played by Jaenzon.

and shadow as much as possible; high and low angles, diagonal and distorted angles, imagery that is often quite incomprehensible and that bypasses the eye and tries to speak straight to one's instinct. When it was taken too far, it became a test for virtuosity and a fashion, and in time, it will be considered a fruitful experimental phase in the history of lighting. [...] Yet, one has to use lighting sparingly. The fewer the lighting sources, the purer the light and the objects and surfaces that are lighted.

(Forsman 1940: 6–7; Forsman cited in Laine 2022: 140–41)

As Kimmo Laine has explained (1999: 141–45, 2016: 98–101, 2022: 139–42), 'French style' refers to a certain Finnish aesthetic inspired by French 1930s cinematographic norms (see also Thompson and Bordwell [(2002) 2018]: 286–93). This article develops Laine's perspective by arguing that the reception of the French aesthetic in Finland is symptomatic of a deeper ideological, socio-economic and model-based influence. Mainly deployed by the studio Suomi Filmi and independent directors such as Nyrki Tapiovaara and Teuvo Tulio, the French style is based on an expressionist use of low-key lighting modulated with filters, low angles, Dutch tilts, deep or two-shot stagings, and a particularly mobile camera playing with scales ranging from close-ups to medium long shots. Narratively, it usually served melodramatic stories focusing on love, morality and social norms, giving them a bittersweet tone or even a melancholic atmosphere. The first traces of this specific Finnish aesthetic can be perceived in Suomi Filmi's *VMV 6* (Orko 1936) and *Ja alla oli tulinen järvi* ('And below was a fiery lake') (Orko 1937),¹ but it is explicitly visible starting from 1938, for example, in *Varastettu kuolema (Stolen Death)* (Tapiovaara 1938), in part due to the recruitment of French cinematographers to work on Finnish productions. Despite critical disparagement of Forsman, directed mainly at the excessive mannerisms of the style aesthetic, the French style continued to be discernible in Finnish cinema until the 1960s.

While the style in itself and the influence of French films of the 1930s on Finnish cinema are often easily recognizable, the reasons for its use are less obvious. Of course, it can be argued that the quality of French films made them internationally renowned and that as a small-nation cinema (see Bacon 2016), the Finnish industry was open to influence. While fundamentally true, this argument does not consider either the context of circulation or the modalities of such transfer. Indeed, we need to explore the extent to which French cinema was popular in 1930s Finland. What did the French style mean for Finnish studios, particularly for Suomi Filmi? Overall, this article analyses the conditions of transfer of French cinema to Finland through what was understood there as the French style.

Aiming at an in-depth exploration of this cultural transfer, my methodology is anchored in transnational film studies (Higbee and Lim 2010; Kääpä and Seppälä 2012; Pór 2021). The article draws from Deborah Shaw's reference framework, based on the following categories: 'transnational modes of production, distribution and exhibition', 'cultural exchange' and 'transnational influence' (Shaw 2013: 52–53, 56–59). Expanding on the concept of small-nation cinema (Bacon 2016; Hjort and Petrie 2007), the article addresses the various cultural exchanges and interactions involved in film production from a multilateral perspective, highlighting the importance of the vector of dynamics that comprise this cultural and economic network. The historical perspective is based on Laine's extensive research on Finnish film studios (1999,

2016, 2022; Laine et al. 2019) and recent work on cultural history and French production studies (Lefevre 2021; Morrissey 2022; Pór and Renouard 2022). It also grounds its theoretical frame in considerations of cinema as a location for shaping ideology, subject to the specific conditions of particular eras and cultures (Lagny 2020; Sorlin 2015). Finally, this research benefits from the contributions of New Cinema History (Biltereyst et al. 2019), which highlights an understanding of the conditions of production as determined in close relation to reception and distribution.

In order to explore the conditions and impact of the French style on Finnish film production, I will first examine the reception of French cinema in Finland, drawing on reviews in the Finnish specialized press. This analysis will help to underline the cultural reception of French cinema as well as the correlation between this reception and the development of the French style in Finland. However, since reviews highlight the intellectual and artistic aspects of the question, it is also necessary to examine the economic and technological conditions – that is, French films on Finnish screens and French production practices in Finnish studios – to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of transfer. Finally, inspired by Marc Ferro's conception of film as social counter-analysis (2000), I synthesize these approaches by considering the socio-ideological use of the French style by Finnish studios, thereby further developing Laine's analysis of Finnish films of the 1930s (1999).

FINNISH CRITICAL RECEPTION OF FRENCH CINEMA

Although it does not include every volume, the National Library of Finland's digitalization of film periodicals (Kansalliskirjasto 2024) helps to identify the recurrence of searched terms – such as the keyword 'French' – in eighteen periodicals. Although it appears that the Finnish press has paid considerable attention to French productions (around 5 per cent of the digitalized pages contain the term, with an epiphenomenal occurrence of 8 per cent in 1932), this search reveals an increase in recurrence from 1933 (5.4 per cent), with a peak in 1939 (15.7 per cent) before falling back slightly during the war (9.7 per cent in 1940 and 10 per cent in 1944). Also purely heuristic, this quantitative observation provides a time frame for the discussion of French style in Finland.

Indeed, 1933 marked the beginning of a new period in Finnish cinema, as the industry had emerged from the Great Depression and completed its transition to talking pictures. Also, after the departure of its co-founder Erkki Karu, Suomi Filmi restructured itself and launched a new entrepreneurial strategy; meanwhile, Karu established Suomen Filmiteollisuus, Finland's second studio and rival of Suomi Filmi (Laine 1999: 15–22; Uusitalo 1994: 106–21). The end of World War II in Europe in 1944 led to a new period of crisis and necessary renewal for the Finnish studios, mainly due to their past affiliation with Nazi Germany's film industry and politics (Laine 2022: 167). During these turbulent years, the notion of 'French style' refers to a precise aesthetic within Finnish studio history that was created in response to the reception of French cinema in Finland.

When analysing contemporary discussion of this aesthetic, a two-fold perspective on French style can be discerned. Although the viewpoints are intimately interconnected, the cultural transfer at hand here refers both to the reception in Finland of a particular aesthetic characteristic of French films and to the visual techniques used by Finnish filmmakers to make French-like

2. All translations from French and Finnish are the author's.

images. The term is used descriptively, referring to a foreign cinema that is compared to domestic films, or it may be evaluative, an implied positive assessment of domestic productions. Raoul af Hällström's article 'Rakasta Ranskaksi' ('Love in French') falls into the first category:

The conquering power of French films is probably due in large part to the sparkle and charm of the filmic tone of their erotic sentiment. French love captivates us on the screen with its sensual pleasure, but also with its distilled sense of life. In any case, it touches the heart of the viewer, captivating them with its intense, life-filled atmosphere.

[[1945] 1995: 151)²

Af Hällström encapsulates the admiration towards 1930s French cinema shared by the vast majority of Finnish critics, who most likely also shared his frame of references (mainly René Clair and poetic realism). He develops here a specific image of French culture and cinema by stressing the films' capacity to move the public by using specific filmic means to tell realistic love stories with a bittersweet and suggestive atmosphere. In general, Finnish critics praise the visual and narrative aspects of the films that convey a sophisticated ambience specific to France, deeply captivating to the audience. Another example of unilateral praise underscores the point: 'If we look at any aspect of French cinema, we are always faced with something new and original. The direction, the acting, the lighting, the music – in everything there is that "something" that makes people talk about French cinema' (Anon. 1937a: 8).

Af Hällström's 1943 article, 'Ranskalainen tyyl'i' ('French style'), written under the pseudonym 'Piccolino', is one of the most extensive examinations of the French aesthetic and its impact in Finland. Following a laudatory analysis of Jean Gabin's work signed with his actual name, Piccolino/af Hällström points to French cinema's cosmopolitanism and then asks: 'When the financiers and other masters were not French, how could the spirit of the film be French? Yet, the greatness of French cinema (and, at the same time, its popularity abroad) is entirely dependent on its Frenchness' (Piccolino 1943: 202). In the racist style typical of the period, the article explores the aesthetic characteristics of French cinema in order to argue that its greatness and identity are found in its nationalist style. Leaving aside the ideological dimension for the moment, we see that, tautologically, French style corresponds to high standards of taste because it is explicitly French. This argument continues the categorization of cinematographic quality on a national basis that emerged throughout Europe in the wake of the development of sound. Already present in other art forms since the nineteenth century, nationalist art discourses underline a cultural rivalry between countries, where geopolitical confrontations are based on the ability to impose standards of taste and quality (Laugée and Rabiller 2020).

While silent films had presented an opportunity to develop internationalist discourses, the arrival of sound led the French film industry to reposition itself in the nationalist frame in an attempt to confront Hollywood's hegemony. In this context, notions of cinematic quality and cinephilia emerged, along with awards, festivals and a specialist press, to assert the artistic value of domestic production and distinguish it from mass culture productions in the United States (Montebello 2005: 3–15). Rooted in the 1920s discussions of cinema as an art form as well as the economic crisis and increasingly xenophobic and antisemitic context of the period – the failed far-right coup of February 1934

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is only the tip of the iceberg – French cinema strove to distinguish itself on the international stage by navigating between the international aspirations of the hegemonic, liberal Hollywood model and the racist, protectionist control of production by Nazi Germany. As more and more French professionals and intellectuals turned towards hatred of foreigners (Lefeuve 2021: 341–52) and as Joseph Goebbels’ cultural politics of cinema, anchored in the *Blut und Boden* Nazi vision of art, gained increasing traction, the leading specialized periodical, *La Cinématographie française*, defended a vision of French cinema based on quality technical effects, skilled acting, original staging and a typically French *esprit* and charm in its themes (Gauthier 2013). This identity can be seen in the focus on national stereotypes, exemplified by actors from the south of France or the Parisian *faubourgs* (Vincendeau 2013: 229). Government involvement also played a role. Starting with the official recognition in 1928 of cinema’s cultural and national importance, domestic cinema was increasingly seen as significant in a broader cultural, ideological and political context. This led to an official definition of a French film as produced by a French studio on French territory with a high percentage of French employees and showing cultural images of France. Furthermore, French discussions of cinema – fuelled by anti-Americanism, antisemitism and racism – contributed to a ranking of national cinemas according to their artistic qualities by juxtaposing art and mass culture (Montebello 2005: 19–30).

This context is important, as the reception of French cinema in Finland is based on an understanding of this film culture as high quality artistically and opposed to Hollywood industrial domination. Despite the state’s official definition of French cinema (which had its origins in a protectionist reaction), French cinema was far more international than it claimed to be. Indeed, like many tsarist Russians in the 1920s, numerous German-speaking filmmakers, actors and technicians found refuge in France in the 1930s and brought with them work habits and aesthetic features (Moussaoui 2022, 2023). Furthermore, the development of French studios in the early 1930s had attracted international talent. Paramount’s Saint-Maurice studio and its ‘American-style’ organization played a central part as a model for the industrialization of French cinema at the time of the transition to sound and in its development as an international creative centre in the early 1930s (Lefeuve 2021: 108–23, 148–51, 2022: 206–07). However, the various international influences were tempered by official discourse and the media to affirm a national specificity. In sum, French cinema emerges as an innovative European industry – far more cosmopolitan and multicentric than its name suggests – and is seen as inventive art cinema based on a tradition of aesthetic quality.

One of the best illustrations of Finland’s intellectual position towards French film is the first Finnish book-length publication on cinema: *Filmi: aikamme kuva* (‘Film: A picture of our time’) (Hällström 1936), by Roland af Hällström (the brother of Raoul af Hällström). Retracing film history, analysing its industrial characteristics and developing aesthetic considerations in the wake of Béla Balázs, it situates Finnish cinema within the broader context of this international industry. Recognizing the dominance of American productions, af Hällström still defends an artistic understanding of cinema (1936: 314–22). Hollywood was seen in Finland, as it was in France, as an efficient mass entertainment industry that nevertheless lacked the cultural traditions and national nuances of European cinemas (see Laine 1999: 212–13). However, the French aesthetic was understood as the quintessence of cinema and was thus established as a model for the emerging Finnish film industry:

3. Despite a shift towards a French aesthetic, the influence of Sweden did not disappear from Finnish cinema and persisted in genres and narrative material. The link here is nevertheless complex, as it requires consideration of the interactions between Scandinavian and French studios from the 1910s onwards, in particular the echoes of Swedish and Danish melodramas in France in the 1920s, but also their cooperation during the 1930s.

French cinema has a special place in the world of filmmaking, both in spirit and in direction, based on its rich artistic traditions and an acting profession that has proven to be particularly adaptable to film and the demanding use of small but judicious means. Moreover, its directors have always had the desire and opportunity to work according to principles of greater value than in other countries, since the average French audience is also artistically quite sophisticated.

(af Hällström 1936: 183)

During the 1930s, Finnish cinema, which until then had drawn its inspiration from Swedish cinema (Seppälä 2017),³ turned to the French model, which was ultimately much more European than purely French. To illustrate this, the advertisement for the film *Syyllisiäkö?* ('Are they guilty?') (Nortimo 1938) in the periodical *Lukemista kaikille* ('Reading for everyone') is a good example: it notes that, in the common view, the artistic achievement of the domestic film industry was made possible by combining national literature, focus on the Finnish family and French style (Anon. 1938: 25; see Laine 1999: 323–24). The overall level of praise for French cinema is summed up in the following ironic comment:

Nowadays, we hardly talk about anything other than French cinema. The critics are akin to mesmerized. They see nothing but the good points of French films and the bad points of other films. Of course, French cinema has its good points, but it is not without its bad points, but these bad ones are never mentioned by film critics. In the same way, there are, of course, plenty of good things about an American film, for example, but some critics have simply taken the view that nothing good is coming from Nazareth.

(Anon. 1937b: 12)

CONDITIONS OF RECEPTION

The reason for French influence on Finnish cinema is not only a putative aesthetic superiority. The upheaval caused by the arrival of sound forced the industry to reinvent itself and find new ways to please spectators in order to continue to be competitive on an international level. Since the history of cinema is formed out of the history of specific techno-economic formations determining aesthetic possibilities and production models, we must consider the development of equipment and economic structures in Finnish studios of the 1930s. Therefore, technical and professional knowledge is taken into account to determine the French style's material conditions of circulation.

Although French studios never were as structured and efficient as their American rivals, they propelled themselves into a leading position in Europe from 1929 to 1933, when the Great Depression compromised the studios' hiring procedures and working conditions. This led not only to the weakening of production pipelines, increased precarity and forced mobility for workers, amplified xenophobia within studios and the need for state support but also to the development of collaborations with European neighbours to revitalize production. This uncertain situation continued until the end of the decade, despite the social benefits of the 1936 electoral victory of the Popular Front (Lefeuvre 2021: 332–53, 384–96, 429–51). As an economic measure, the government forced French studios to make their productions available to

other markets. Finland, where the crisis had shorter consequences on the film industry, benefitted from this policy because the French were more inclined to sell their films at reasonable prices.

From 1934 to 1940, Suomi Filmi's Board of Directors was progressively controlled by what Kari Uusitalo calls the Triumvirate, that is, Risto Orko (head of production), Matti Schreck (president and CEO) and Nils Dahlström (head of distribution). In 1936, each of them owned 24.5 per cent of Suomi Filmi's shares. Under Orko's lead, they developed the studio not only to face competition from Suomen Filmiteollisuus but also to expand their dominance over Finnish cinema. From 1934 onwards, Orko went on study trips to meet other film professionals and to get information on new equipment (Uusitalo 1999: 75–82).⁴ As Orko explained:

I felt that the best place for me to study, especially laboratory matters, was in France, where I went in 1934. [...] In 1935 I repeated my visit, and at the Paramount Film Centre I was introduced to a Finnish employee called Åke Leppä, who came from near Helsinki. Leppä was an equipment maintenance man in the laboratory and was naturally one of those who could advise me.

(cited in Töyri 1978: 214–15)

The encounter with Leppä was fruitful, as he became Suomi Filmi's right-hand man in France (Orko 1936). Later on, with Leppä's help, Orko encouraged study trips to the Paris studios. As early as 1933, periodicals began sending journalists to report on the workings of French studios (see Cine 1933).

From the mid-1930s until World War II, there was also an increase in the distribution of French films in Finland. As a small-nation cinema with a domestic production that has frequently struggled to find audiences and has never been able to keep up with public demand, Finnish cinema has always been dependent on international films (Bacon 2016: 230–31; Uusitalo 1994: 2–3). Whereas Suomi Filmi had imported films since 1926 to finance its production activities, Suomen Filmiteollisuus relied on its partnership with distribution company Adams Filmi to obtain the necessary production funds (Hupaniittu 2019: 37–45). Therefore, importing films was part of a financial strategy aimed at generating revenue and thus subsidizing the production of domestic films with the highest possible budgets.

While only four French films (2 per cent of the films distributed in Finland) premiered in 1934, the percentage multiplied by three the following year (6 per cent). Then in 1936 and 1937, with twenty and 21 films, 8 per cent of the premieres were French. They culminated in 1938 with 44 films (14 per cent) and 1939 with 41 films (15 per cent). In 1940, after the outbreak of World War II, only 22 French films were imported to Finland, but this still represented 17 per cent of the market. Not only in Finland and France but throughout Europe, the war put film production in a peculiar situation, marked negatively by, among other things, a shortage of film stock, control by the German authorities, a loss of financial and human resources and restrictions on production and import/export. Paradoxically, French and Finnish cinemas were positively stimulated by strong public demand for entertainment (many other genres were either impossible to make or forbidden), coupled with the loss of Hollywood hegemony; American films were banned in Vichy France and severely restricted in Finland, militarily allied with Nazi Germany (Jeancolas 1995: 52–60; Sedergren 1995). As the German occupation of France

4. Although study trips were made to Sweden and Germany in the 1920s, France was the favourite destination from 1934 onwards.

reduced its international distribution capacity, only five French films per year were shown in Finland in 1941 and 1942 (3 per cent), then ten in 1943 (6 per cent) and thirteen in 1944 (7 per cent), and finally only three in 1945 (1 per cent). We thus observe that the number of premiered films illustrates a far more modest French presence on Finnish screens than what critical reception would lead us to assume.

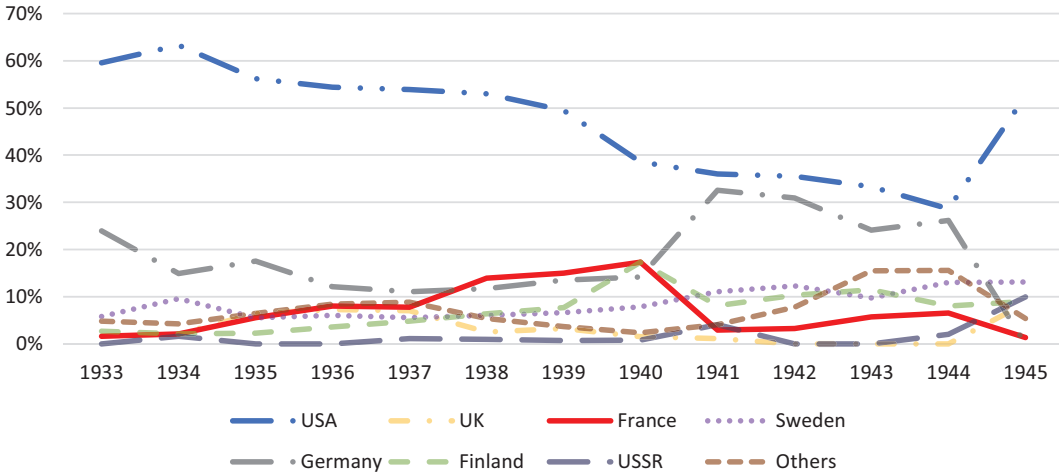


Figure 1: Percentage of film per country screened in Finland (Adams-Filmi 1943, 1959).

This chart needs to be contextualized with cinema-going patterns in Finland. As Outi Hupaniittu shows in her statistical study of cinema attendance in Finland from 1915 to 2015, it reached an all-time high during this period, and domestic films were particularly popular with audiences, despite the relatively low number of premieres (Hupaniittu 2015: 11–13, 17–18). Starting in 1933, the frequency of cinema-going increased, with 6,587,000 admissions recorded that year (1.9/inhabitant), culminating in 1945 with 36,301,000 admissions (9.83/inhabitant) before decreasing in the post-war years (Hupaniittu 2015: 11–12; Keto 1974: 108). Furthermore, analysing Finnish cinema during the 1930s, Laine observes that ‘[at] the end of the decade, 22 domestic films accounted for around 37% of the total box office, with 251 foreign films sharing the rest’ (1999: 71). Based on these data, it is possible to extrapolate that domestic films were prevalent during the 1930s and 1940s. Moreover, in regard to the enthusiastic critical reception of French cinema and its aesthetic influence, we can use these data to formulate the hypothesis that French films were more popular than the number of premieres suggests.

The French presence in Finnish cinema is also found at the film production level. Through the mediation of Leppä, Suomi Filmi equipped its laboratory with photographic printing and film copying machines in 1937 (Töyri 1978: 215). During the same period, the studio bought two sound recorders from Sweden, four Cinephon sound cameras from Czechoslovakia and also a prestigious Debrie camera from France. Alongside the technical modernization, Suomi Filmi also recruited skilled foreign technicians to operate these devices, but above all to train the Finnish workforce to use them. Arranged by Leppä, cinematographers Marius Raichi and Charlie Bauer and the head of laboratory

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Raymond Grosset arrived from France. From Sweden came the sound engineers Georg Brodén and Anders Djuberg as well as the cinematographer Albert Rudling (Uusitalo 1999: 82). To a certain extent, the recruitment in 1935 of Erik Blomberg, who had studied cinematography in Paris (Töyri 1983: 41), to shoot *VMV 6* can also be seen as a French import. Not only is *VMV 6* one of the first Finnish films to use the French style, but Blomberg was also the cinematographer for three films by Teuvo Tulio (*Taistelu Heikkilän talosta* [‘The fight over the Heikkilä mansion’] [Tulio 1936], *Nuorena nukkunut* [‘Silja – Fallen asleep when young’] [Tulio 1937] and *Kiusaus* [‘Temptation’] [Tulio 1938]) and three by Nyrki Tapiovaara (*Stolen Death* [Tapiovaara 1938], *Kaksi Vihtoria* [‘Two henpecked husbands’] [Tapiovaara 1939] and *Miehen tie* [‘One Man’s Fate’] [Tapiovaara 1940]), whose aesthetics are explicit examples of the style.

Because the profession was learned in the studios as on-the-job training, the recruitment of French cinematographers can be understood in terms of pedagogical expertise, since the French studios – the main places of apprenticeship at the time – were home to a wide range of talents from all over Europe and strongly promoted mentorship. The previously evoked xenophobic protectionism of the French industry placed foreign technicians in a precarious situation while benefitting from their expertise (Moussaoui 2022: 49–50). It is worth noting that the French technicians employed by Suomi-Filmi were part of the new generation trained by German *émigrés* (e.g. Curt Courant by Charlie Bauer) who had been immersed in the international context of French production. Derived from German practices, this training induced a more structured and collaborative pattern of teamwork (Moussaoui 2022; Phillips 2003: 41–50). Moreover, since the second half of the 1920s, there had been institutionalized training opportunities for cinematographers and set designers in France (Lefevre 2021: 230–45; Morrissey 2022: 373–96). Although neither compulsory nor even the major path, this testifies to a standardized level of knowledge.

Later on, other studios followed Suomi-Filmi’s strategy and also recruited foreign technicians. For example, in 1939, Suomen Filmitoimisto – while enticing Marius Raichi from Suomi-Filmi – took advantage of the arrival of Italian cinematographer Vittorio Mantovani (who came to film the Helsinki Olympic Games scheduled for 1940) to hire him. Likewise, the small studio Sampo-Filmi hired cinematographer Pierre Levent from 1938 to 1939.

Raichi’s transition to Suomen Filmitoimisto contributed to a change in the studio’s style:

Compared to the striking ‘French style’ of some of Suomi-Filmi’s and especially Tulio and Tapiovaara’s films, the typical expression in the films of Suomen Filmitoimisto was blunt and pragmatic with visibility and seamless narrative as guiding principles. High-key lighting was preferred to low key, and as it is witnessed by those who worked at Suomen Filmitoimisto, the arc lights in the studios were extremely bright and hot. [...] Whereas in the ‘French style’ there was a certain self-sufficiency and expressiveness in the camera angles, movements, and compositions, in a typical Suomen Filmitoimisto film, the main focus was always on the characters. Reframing motivated most camera movements, since the central function of the camera was to follow the actor.

(Laine 2022: 142–43)

Besides these general differences, Raichi’s cinematography for Suomen Filmitoimisto continued to evoke the French style. In the five films concerned – *Pikku pelimanni* (‘The little fiddler’) (Särkkä 1939b), *Serenaadi sotatorvella*

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eli Sotamies Paavosen tuurihousut ('Serenade with a war trumpet, or Private Paavonen's pants of fortune') (Särkkä 1939c), *Aatamin puvussa... ja vähän Eevankin* ('Dressed like Adam and a little like Eve, too') (Elstelä 1940), *Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu* ('The king of poets and the bird of passage') (Särkkä 1940a) and *Suotorpan tyttö* ('The girl from the marshcroft') (Särkkä 1940b) – there is a more expressionistic use of shadows and shot angles and scales, but also a more mobile camera than the studio's aesthetic standards. In this aspect, we can consider that Raichi's recruitment to Suomen Filmiteollisuus continued a strategy, started with 'Are they guilty?', to orient the studio's aesthetic towards the French style in order to meet the expectations of their audience (Laine 1999: 323–27).

The use of French technicians and material corresponds with the distribution of French cinema in Finland, providing a key moment of development for the Finnish industry as the French industry faced a tenuous situation. Regarding the particularly active role of Suomi Filmi, this international outlook was presumably motivated by a desire to stand out from the competition, not only by using a French style but above all by presenting the company as international and modern in scope and thus emphasizing not only its aesthetic aspirations but also its economic motivations.

FROM ONE NATION'S SERVICE TO ANOTHER

Cinema is a mass entertainment industry in a capitalist world system for which generating economic profit is a key goal. However, such concerns also have cultural and ideological connotations. If we only consider economic aspects, the Finnish link forged with French studios and the use of this particular aesthetic can be seen as surprising in a period of hegemony of the Hollywood model and its production practices. The fact is that '[while] critics praised the sophisticated charm of French films, from the point of view of the film companies, French cinema set the standard for filmmaking practices and professional skills' (Laine 2022: 6). I argue that, in combination with aesthetic arguments but also for technical and financial reasons, the motivation lies within the patriotic ideology that French cinema inspired in Finnish cinema at a time of nationalist affirmation.

A film creates a discourse on the social context from which it emerges, but it is also received by spectators according to certain modalities. When they are consumed, films diffuse a society's way of looking at and figuring out its time and place. An individual film within the institution called cinema therefore develops a rhetoric challenging the spectator to react to and accept or reject the world-view the film incites them to see (Odin 2011; Sorlin 2015: 83–88; Soulez 2011). Thus, through the very form of the images and narratives chosen, it is a conception of the world that circulates. Understood in this way, cinema must be seen as a medium where ideology is shaped, subject to a construction specific to a particular period and culture. In this respect, the sociocultural and historical significance of the forms observed is essential. In line with Laine's study of the development of Finnish national cinema, audience and identity during the 1930s (1999), I argue that the transfer of the 1930s French aesthetics to Finland played a key role in this process.

Analysing the rhetoric of Finnish films of the late 1930s to constitute an idea of national identity in Suomen Filmiteollisuus's *Helmikuun manifesti* ('February manifesto') (Särkkä 1939a) and Suomi Filmi's *Aktivistit* (*Activists*) (Orko 1939), Laine shows that:

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[by] attracting men and women of different classes and from different regions, of different ages, to participate 'personally' in their historical portraits, the films also raised the question of the role of the individual as part of different groups. Both films seek to answer this question principally on the terms of the nation. In other words, nationality is seen as the highest level of identity in the hierarchy, which masks other identities and brings together different social experiences to serve the national experience of the community.

(1999: 303)

These two prestige films dealt with Finland's struggle for independence in the early twentieth century by developing a nationalistic and anti-Russian propaganda discourse (Laine 1999: 249–304). One major difference is the intensive use of the French style in *Activists*, whereas 'February manifesto' is characteristic of the Suomen Filmitölkki style.

However, considering Suomen Filmitölkki's interest in the French style from 1938 onwards and the fact that Suomi Filmi's extensive use of this style was well known, the explicit use of the French aesthetic for 'February manifesto' is not insignificant. I would thus argue that both films developed their national discourses in response to French cinema, either by embracing it – the Suomi Filmi production – or by trying to prevail over it – the Suomen Filmitölkki production. These two understandings of national cinema can be seen as early as 1935, when Orko, on his return from Paris, took inspiration from France to develop Suomi Filmi (Aili 1935: 10). Meanwhile, Karu argued for the development of national specificity in Finnish cinema, just as 'French cinema could not exist if it had lost its way in imitating American cinema, for example, in an attempt to become "international"'⁵ (Karu 1935: 6). In both cases, the films illustrate an ideological position in relation to a precedent, in this case that of French nationalism in the 1930s, or more precisely, an interpretation of it in Finland at the time. More than a mere aesthetic transfer, the Finnish 'French style' is also the redeployment of French cinema's nationalist rhetoric.

As previously suggested, during the 1930s, the imported contribution to the development of a national cinema in France was reduced by French media and official discourse to a mere visual technique at the service of the prestige of French productions (Moussaoui 2023; Phillips 2003: 48–49). French cinema conveyed a certain constructed image of national identity that relied on creating an atmosphere that used various cultural stereotypes and cinematographic conventions, consolidating a connection between its aesthetic characteristics and a nationalist imagination. As an affirmation of national quality, the French aesthetic became an identification factor on an international scale and an alternative to Hollywood or German standards.

Indeed, French cinema was the vector of France's conservative and petty-bourgeois ideology marked by patriarchal domination and a taste for established law, order and culture (Burch and Sellier 1999: 23–84; Sorlin et al. 1986: 55–91). Apart from certain exceptions, for example, Jean Renoir's *La vie est à nous* (*The People of France*) (1936) and *La règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*) (1939), the 1930s French cinema in general focused on individual sentimental stories in which the social order is always re-established at the end with a reassuring figure of authority having the last word, even when these films show the working class. The sociopolitical problems are excluded in order to promote a neutralized world where the established order is taken for granted. As Sorlin et al. observe about the period's war films:

5. Karu's point of view lived on in Suomen Filmitölkki after his death in late 1935.

6. Although the coup failed, an extreme right faction was present until the end of the war.

The nation is the nation: to be recognized in the tautological presupposition – it's up to each spectator to find his or her side and, if he or she wishes, to invest his or her value system in it. [...] If we look to war films as a breeding ground for the ideological constitution of sides, we find, at least on an explicit level, that the mere existence of war is enough to discriminate between sides: a vicious circle in which we can read both the elision of the motives that legitimize war and the absence of justification for national identities whose existence is self-evident.

(1986: 99–100)

In doing so, cinema contributes to the constitution of the national imagination. Its role as an ideological institution is particularly explicit here, and there is no doubt that it was already so in the 1930s. This is quite clear when one considers how the representation of the patriarchy changed during World War II and the occupation (Burch and Sellier 1999: 87–214). In this respect, this ideological change had no echo in Finland; it was above all the pre-war French model that left its mark on Finnish cinema. Indeed, even during the war years, Finnish press discussion of French cinema focused on the quality of the pre-war period.

Also, as a particularly effective nation in terms of cultural diplomacy, France has asserted its cultural and by extension ideological standards internationally (Horne 2017; Ranki 2008; Seppälä 2008), even in Finland.

France has been caught in the middle of Finnish contradictions. It has served as a model or support when Finland was being built and has represented the heart of Europe. [...] France has had only an instrumental significance when we highlight cases of Finns meeting France, as we find, above all, the Finns themselves at the centre of attention.

(Ranki and Clerc 2008: 257–58)

Ranki and Clerc underline here Finland's tendency to define itself in terms of its image of France. In the 1930s, cinema was especially important as a link between two nations in the process of asserting their identity. The situation of Finland during the decade is marked not only by an increasing fear of the Soviet Union and a determination to exist as a nation in a complex international political situation but also by a desire not to succumb to the fascism it had narrowly avoided with the Lapua Movement's failed coup of February 1932.⁶ The French style – understood as a preconceived signifying structure specifically used for the affirmation of a national identity – was therefore a useful tool for Finnish studios. They benefitted from an advantageous economic and technical context, they could assert high artistic standards, and they bought into an existing ideological system that corresponded to their national views.

On this matter, it is revealing to juxtapose French and Finnish studio productions. As an example, *Marthe Richard au service de la France* (*Marthe Richard*) (Bernard 1937) and *Activists* display many similarities. The two films invite comparison, as the first was distributed by Suomi Filmi a month and a half after the premiere of the second (which was produced by the same studio); both were photographed by Charlie Bauer and belong to the war and espionage film genre. Moreover, both films are striking examples of the use of French style for national propaganda purposes. Both of them anchored their stories in previous conflicts – World War I in *Marthe Richard* and the Finnish war for

independence in *Activists* – to develop a nationalist conservative exhortation combining love and duty. The narrative structures feature a triangle combining seduction, lies and confrontation between the protagonist couple and the antagonist. All characters are presented mainly in a stereotypical manner. In both films, the couple is young, brave and adheres to the spirit of national sacrifice, while the antagonist, in contrast, is presented as cruel and decadent, embodying the hereditary enemy against whom the nation is uniting. Finally, the shift from narrative similarities to explicit political rhetoric completes a relationship that transcends borders. Although the films do not emerge from the same context and are not similar in their discourses, they converge towards a similar structure and style in the service of parallel national ideologies.

CONCLUSION

The French style, with its lighting techniques, framing effects and ideological content, is symptomatic of a deeper cultural flow from France to Finland. Overall, Lefevre, echoing Gauthier's conclusion (2013: 198–99), ends her book about French studios in the 1930s by proposing that:

French studios were charting a third course between the Hollywood studio system and the state-supported studios of Cinecittà or Babelsberg. It is a model with blurred, ill-defined contours, in which the state intervenes as a mere regulator and places the creators of the cinematographic work at the heart of the system.

(Lefevre 2021: 458–59)

Building on this perspective, I argue that the French style is the symptom of a deeper influence of one studio model on another. Beyond style, the French film industry provided a model for Finnish studios to enhance the artistic quality of their productions and express their national identity.

Through the analysis of critical reception, economic and technological conditions and the socio-ideological context, this article has explored the reasons for the use of the French aesthetic in Finnish films of the 1930s and its impact on the industry. The Finnish critics' admiration of French cinema was based on a perception of high artistic quality and sophistication. French films were seen as a model for Finnish cinema, particularly in terms of technical and narrative standards. The economic and technological conditions of the 1930s Finnish film industry also contributed to the adoption of the French style. For example, the Suomi Filmi studio recruited French technicians, acquired French equipment and extensively distributed French films. Additionally, the transfer of the French style to Finnish cinema played a crucial role in the development of national identity and the construction of ideological discourses. Finnish films of the 1930s often used the style as a vehicle for national propaganda, combining motifs of love, duty and conservative values to reinforce the Finnish sense of identity.

The aim of this article has been to explore a rich and complex transnational dynamic. Although many specifics still need to be explored in greater detail, this general overview makes it possible to frame the integration of Finnish cinema within European productions of the 1930s and to open the door to new research, for example about the role of French technicians in the Finnish film industry or the ideological modulations of a multicentric transfer between Germany, France and Finland.

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