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# A narrative of women and war: The Finnish silent era film ‘On the warpath’

**ABSTRACT**

*This article discusses the film Sotapolulla (‘On the warpath’) (1922), a pioneering work in the early years of Finnish cinema. By highlighting the role that women played during the Finnish Civil War (1918), scriptwriter and director Teuvo Pakkala, a well-known conservative writer, created a model of femininity for the post-war period. The construction of the female characters accords with the standards of femininity in Hollywood silent film, which featured strong, assertive women committed to the social order. Thus Pakkala’s film in significant ways follows the classical model that Noël Burch identifies as an institutional mode of representation.*

**KEYWORDS**

Teuvo Pakkala  
Finnish silent cinema  
Finnish Civil War  
cinema and gender  
cinema and history  
cinema and contempo-  
rary conflicts

The main objective of this article is to explain how Teuvo Pakkala’s film *Sotapolulla* (‘On the warpath’) (1922), a pioneering work of Finnish cinema, presents the role that women played during the Finnish Civil War in accordance with the director’s ideology rather than actual historical events. Accordingly, the article first examines the key elements of the Finnish Civil War, in particular the role of women in this conflict, because the two sides mobilized them in activities that were consistent with their respective ideologies.

The analysis of the female characters is in line with Richard Dyer’s (2001) notions of character creation and the relationships between characters, authentic social referents and silent film models. Cinematographic images serve as

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valuable sources that complement historical narratives. Viewed through this lens, Pakkala's film exemplifies historian Robert Rosenstone's observation concerning the importance of film characters for illustrating historical events: 'Through their eyes and lies, adventures and loves, we see strikes, invasions, revolutions, dictatorships, ethnic conflict, scientific experiments, legal battles, political movements, holocausts' (2006: 16). In their roles as protagonist/antagonist, the female characters in Pakkala's film thus become, as Rosenstone writes, 'referents of social and national problems' (1995: 57).

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After centuries of Swedish rule, in 1809, Finland became a grand duchy of the Russian Empire. In this capacity, Finland gained a degree of independence; in 1863, an assembly was established at the behest of Tsar Alexander II. His measures favoured some Finnish interests, such as a national currency, recognition of Finnish as an official language, and a national army (Jutikkala and Pirinen 1962: 123). During the reigns of subsequent tsars, however, the situation of the Grand Duchy of Finland changed. Alexander III and Nicholas II implemented a Russification process to impose the Russian language and culture in Finland by eliminating Finnish cultural identity (Polvinen 1995: 133).

In 1906, the assembly, with four chambers, each representing a specific social class, became a parliament. A representative unicameral system was adopted, as were many innovative measures, including full political and social rights for women. Universal suffrage resulted in the election of nineteen female parliamentarians for the first time in history. However, the Tsar soon dissolved the newly-formed parliament and assumed personal control over the Grand Duchy. In 1917, circumstances changed once more due to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The disappearance of the Tsarist bureaucratic structures and the collapse of the fledgling democratic government that had emerged after the revolution allowed Finland to achieve independence, a political objective that the two main political parties, the Conservatives and the Social Democrats, had pursued. On 6 December 1917, the Finnish parliament proposed a declaration of independence that was accepted and recognized by Lenin, who had seized power in Russia (Haapala 2014: 23).

The declaration of independence failed to resolve disagreements between the two dominant political factions. An example of the increasing radicalization of the time was the creation of two paramilitary units, the conservative *Suojeluskunta* ('White Guards') and the left-wing *Punakaarti* ('Red Guards'). The two organizations were influential in different regions of the country. The Red Guards were particularly active in Helsinki and the southern part of the country, which was industrialized. The White Guards commanded majority support in the north, the largest agricultural area of Finland. Consequently, the country was divided into two spheres of influence.

After several sporadic clashes, on 27 January 1918, the two sides fought for control over the railway between Viipuri, Tampere and St. Petersburg. This strategic objective precipitated the start of the Civil War. The conflict lasted for three and a half months and witnessed the mobilization of foreign forces, including Russian Bolshevik soldiers and German Empire troops that specialized in urban warfare. Numerous women assumed active combat roles on the Red side. These female units followed the model of similar formations that had been created in Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution. In 1918, they participated in the battles of Tampere, Helsinki, Vyborg, Antrea and

the Karelian peninsula, proving highly effective during the withdrawal from Tavastia, where they halted the advance of the experienced German troops (Narváez 2019: 61).

According to Tuomas Tepora, the war led to 38,000 deaths, many from summary executions that both sides carried out, and to fierce repression, which saw nearly 80,000 sent to concentration camps (2014: 364). After the war ended in a White victory, the ruling conservative government embarked on a path of reconstruction. The wounds that the conflict had caused healed slowly. From the outset, the notion of Finnish culture was used to consolidate the identity of a nation in which Swedish and Russian influences were prominent. Literary authors such as Frans Emil Silanpää, Uuno Kailas, Joel Lehtonen and Teuvo Pakkala turned to this task. Their involvement marked the beginning of a long collaboration between writers and the film industry. In later years, authors such as Mika Waltari and Väinö Linna also engaged in such efforts (Sundholm 2012: 259).

Cinema, a new form of artistic expression, became part of the drive to create a nationalist discourse. As Outi Hupaniittu points out:

Filmmakers wanted to take an active part in the creation of Finnishness and national culture. Simultaneously, film sought the status of legitimized art by adapting nationally significant literature and engaging prominent writers, actors, and directors from the world of literature and drama.

(2016: 26)

In a similar vein, Pietari Kääpä notes that films produced by the modest Finnish industry served 'to unite the divided country into a national film audience' (2012: 69).

## EARLY FINNISH CINEMA

Representatives of the French company Chapuis and Mathieu exhibited the Lumière cinematograph at the Hotel Societetshuset in Helsinki between 27 June and 7 July 1896. Thereafter, the foundations of the Finnish film industry were based on local distribution and production (Abel 2005: 242). In 1899, A. W. Grönroos founded the first Finnish distributor, Pohjola. Kinematograf International, the first permanent cinema in Finland, opened in Helsinki in 1901. In 1906, Teuvo Puro established the first national production company, Ateliers Apollo. The first Finnish film, *Salaviinanpolttajat* (*The Moonshiners*) (Sparre and Puro 1907), co-directed by Louis Sparre and Puro, was shot in 1907.

The nascent Finnish film industry grew as rapidly as its counterparts in the rest of Europe. The National Audiovisual Institute in Helsinki establishes that fiction films of the silent era encompassed dramas, comedies, crime stories, romcoms and war films. If documentary films are included, the Finnish industry produced 93 films between 1907 and 1931. Important directors, who in some cases also wrote the screenplays, included Kaarle Halme, Bror Berger, Puro, Erkki Karu and Hjalmar V. Pohjanheimo. As this list suggests, the industry was male-dominated, but the first female screenwriters, Katri Viita and Gerda Hintze, also made a contribution (cf. Pennanen 2016; 2017). Simultaneous sound and image recording was introduced in 1931, when *Aatamin puvussa ja vähän Eevankin* ('In Adam's dress and a bit in Eve's, too') (Korhonen 1931) became the first Finnish 'talkie'.

In Finland, as in other European countries, locally produced films coexisted with others from the main production centres of the world: Denmark, France, Italy and the United States. At first, films were inexpensive spectacles for mass entertainment. In the mid-1910s, as increasingly complex films began to draw on literary and theatrical sources for their plots, the cinema began to attract a middle-class audience. Cinema thus became another cultural instrument in the struggle for national identity (Hupaniittu 2016: 24).

### PAKKALA AND 'ON THE WARPATH'

A pioneer of the Finnish film industry (Cherchi Usai 1997: 152), Pakkala (1862–1925) was aligned with the movement promoting a nationalist cultural policy. Before turning to film, he was a well-known novelist, journalist and playwright whose most successful works included *Lapsuuteni muistoja* ('Memories of my childhood') (Pakkala 1885), *Oulua soutamassa* ('Rowing on the Oulu River') (Pakkala 1886), *Vaaralla: kuvia laitakaupungilta* ('Vaara: Pictures from the outskirts') (Pakkala 1891) and *Elsa: kuvauksia elämästä Vaaralla* ('Elsa: Descriptions of life in Vaara') (Pakkala 1894). His literary style, also evident in the script of 'On the warpath', was influenced by the realist movement, which highlighted authenticity, well-defined characters and 'the contrast between the decent people of humble means and the uncomprehending bourgeois[ie]'

(Laitinen 1998: 95). Pakkala typically used young protagonists to illustrate and embody ideological contrasts. The film 'On the warpath' is a cinematic realization of substantial propagandistic value, notwithstanding the narrative device of a romantic story.

Despite the presence of established production companies such as Suomi Filmi, 'On the warpath' was produced by Finn Film, which Pakkala founded in early 1921, prompted by the desire to produce his own script. Since 'On the warpath' was Pakkala's sole venture in the new medium, Finn Film was soon dissolved.

Although the film focuses on a major White offensive that took place during the final phase of the war in the spring of 1918, for practical reasons it was shot in August and September in the towns of Kajaani, Paltamo and Mikkeli. Only natural lighting was used and night scenes were filmed during the day. Intertitles informed viewers when and where events were taking place.

Pakkala edited the film with the artist Johan W. Mattila. They established a narrative rhythm that approximates the classical Hollywood style, as will be discussed later. Mattila's foray into filmmaking, like Pakkala's, was short-lived, although he had previously collaborated with A. O. Väisänen on a documentary, *Häidenvietto Karjalan runomailla* ('Wedding in poetic Karjala') (Pakkala and Väisänen 1921). This work was the first Finnish film to have a dedicated score, composed by Armas Launis (Glöd staf 2018: 102).

Since Swedish was the first language of a sizeable share of the Finnish population, Pakkala distributed the film in two separate versions with Finnish or Swedish intertitles. The Swedish title of the film, *På krigsstråt*, was a direct translation from Finnish. When released in Sweden, however, the film drew little attention. Before the Finnish premiere, Pakkala arranged a private screening on 16 December 1921 for his journalist colleagues in Oulu, his home town. The following day the newspaper *Kaleva* announced that Pakkala's domestic film would premiere in January, describing it as follows:

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The film is shot in the well-known natural beauty of the hinterlands of Kajaani and showcases our country's nature very favourably. [...] The plot is put together by making use of incidents from the Civil War and Karelian skirmishes, although it is not directly related to any of them. Some of the actors are quite well-known [...]. The cinematography is generally well-executed, and the texts are also interesting.

(Anon. 1921b: 4)

The first public screening in Finland took place on 20 January 1922 at the Ivalo Theatre in Oulu. Newspaper reviews were generally favourable (Anon. 1922a: 3, 1922b: 4, 1922c: 4). Later the film was shown in Mikkeli, Jyväskylä, Kajaani, Lahti, Savonlinna and Joensuu, towns that, like Oulu, were strongholds of the White side during the Civil War. At an earlier special screening in Helsinki for 'invited guests', 'On the warpath' elicited a mixed response; according to one newspaper report, '[t]he plot is not cohesive, and the scenes are not sufficiently connected', but 'the film features beautiful landscapes [...] and some well-captured details' (Anon. 1921a: 2). One reason for this lack of enthusiasm



**Liikkuvien kuvien ottoa Suomessa.**

Matkue otti kuvia "Sotapoluilta" nimiseen kuvasarjaan. Keskellä kirjailija Teuvo Pakkala, joka hiljattain täytti 60 vuotta.

Figure 1: Snapshot taken during the filming of *Sotapolulla* ('On the warpath'). From left to right, actors Jorma Vaajakallio and Lisi Carén; scriptwriter and director Teuvo Pakkala; his son Erkki Pakkala, the cameraman; and an unidentified man. The photo accompanied an essay by Yrjö Joki, 'Kirjallisuuden vaikutus' ('The influence of literature'), that appeared in June 1922 in *Koti* ('Home'), a cultural magazine published in Michigan and Minnesota for immigrants of Finnish descent. The caption reads, 'Taking moving pictures in Finland. Group photograph from the filming of "On the warpath". At the centre is the writer Teuvo Pakkala, who recently turned 60'. The film itself apparently was not distributed in the United States.

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1. The copy I have seen, from the National Audiovisual Institute of Finland, lasts 51 minutes and 32 seconds. It is thus somewhat shorter than the original (65 minutes, 1500 m); some footage has been lost.

may have been the capital city's strong support of the Red cause during the conflict.

'On the warpath' was the first Finnish dramatization of the recent civil conflict. The Danish filmmaker Carl Th. Dreyer had previously touched on this subject in *Blade af Satans Bog* (*Leaves from Satan's Book*) (Dreyer 1920), an episodic film that concludes with a moralistic story set during the Finnish Civil War. In contrast, Pakkala's work is notable for its strongly propagandistic orientation, which was linked to conservative politics.

### **Plot**

The film portrays the adventures of a young woman, Eliina (Lisi Carén), during the last days of the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> The narrative begins with the presentation of Jurta (Bertel Nordenstreng), a communist leader for whom a fortune teller augurs a promising future in the military. Then, the male protagonist Karunka (Yrjö Hirviseppä), a skilled and fearless spy for the Whites known to the communist revolutionaries as the White Devil, is introduced. Another important character, the female rebel referred to only as the Guerrilla (Lilli Carén), also appears.

Determined to demonstrate her devotion to the White Devil, Eliina disguises herself as a boy so that she can be close to her beloved and help him fight against the Reds. After completing several infiltration missions, Eliina is congratulated by the officers and then retrieves her women's clothes. She goes to meet the White Devil, who has been imprisoned by mistake by the Whites because only a few officers know his identity. The Guerrilla, in turn, has known the White Devil since childhood and like Eliina has a romantic interest in him. She decides to surrender to the Whites and then kills herself, creating turmoil that enables the White Devil to flee, only to be captured by the Reds.

Eliina, now disguised in stereotypical gypsy attire, manages to infiltrate the Red camp by taking advantage of a White attack. She locates the White Devil and tricks Jurta into believing she has killed him. Then Eliina returns to her family just before the White army liberates the town. The end of the film shows Eliina declaring her love for the White Devil, who shares her feelings. The newly united couple are standing by the entrance of a house on which the Finnish flag is flying.

### **Narrative structure and cinematic techniques**

Before analysing the female characters in the story, it is helpful to delve into the narrative structure of 'On the warpath', which contains various elements that make it an example of cinema transitioning towards the Institutional Representation Mode (IMR) outlined by Noël Burch in his works *Theory of Film Practice* (1981) and *Life to Those Shadows* (1990). IMR refers to the conventions and techniques employed by the mainstream film industry to create a fluid, transparent and immersive film experience for the audience. Among its features are continuity editing, realistic acting, a linear narrative and classical storytelling techniques (psychological motivation, struggle to overcome obstacles, clearly defined goals), with particular attention to spatio-temporal organization (Burch 1981). Additionally, the story is organized in accordance with the traditional Aristotelian stages of exposition, development and resolution. Many of these characteristics can be identified in 'On the warpath'.

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Pakkala employs the classic linear narrative structure, as defined by Burch, to develop the story on a fluid timeline set in the present, incorporating nine flashback sequences that illustrate relationships between the characters in the past as well as providing information about omitted narrative details. For instance, the opening sequence features a flashback introducing Jurtta, the Red commander, consulting a fortune teller who predicts his future leadership. The construction of this sequence is intriguing, as it begins with a wide shot of Jurtta leaving a cabin, followed by a medium shot of him indoors with the fortune teller, effectively creating a temporal shift into the past. The subsequent wide shot then brings the action back to the present, with Jurtta fulfilling the prophesy in his role as the Red commander.

Pakkala utilizes flashbacks for informational purposes throughout the film. When Eliina rejects the mayor's marriage proposal, a flashback reveals her romantic interest in the White Devil, sparked by a brief encounter. In the dramatic scene where the Guerrilla frees the White Devil, betraying the Red faction, a flashback elucidates the characters' long-standing relationship, established in childhood. In another noteworthy flashback sequence, the White Devil informs Eliina's relatives, the Aira family, about her whereabouts. This flashback also serves the purpose of granting the White Devil a narrative voice, as it is through his story, materialized in the flashback, that the viewer gains access to the information.

Regarding the use of space, Pakkala constructs a diverse diegetic environment, incorporating both rural and urban settings. The Red and White troops' camps are situated in natural areas, while the headquarters are located in urban spaces. The prison camp for the Reds is located in a suburb. Action scenes and the relatively few depictions of battle take place in natural surroundings with forests, rivers and hills. Within each of these spaces, the frames are meticulously composed, with Pakkala employing various techniques to create a sense of depth that include the use of diagonals, positioning characters at the edges of the frame, and showcasing simultaneous actions within the same frame.

Burch emphasized the significance of spatial continuity in IMR (1981: 3–16). While 'On the warpath' may not adhere strictly to the 180-degree rule or shot-reverse-shot technique to simulate dialogue between characters, Pakkala's approach is complex and skilful. For instance, the sequence in which Eliina encounters the White Devil is filmed frontally, establishing the axis of action by the position of the characters and allowing the viewer to grasp the narrative content. A wide shot presents a poster displaying the reward for his capture offered by the Reds, followed by a full shot positioning Eliina in front of the poster. The White Devil appears from off-screen, observing Eliina, thus employing rudimentary off-screen techniques wherein a character witnesses the actions of another. Subsequently, alternating use of medium and full shots captures Eliina's reactions. A similar situation recurs in the sequence where the mayor betrays the White Devil, where a medium shot showcases the mayor's demeanour. This use of shots demonstrates how Pakkala strives to imbue the action with dynamism and drama, emphasizing specific moments that can only be achieved through closer shots of the characters. Furthermore, the film employs proper continuity in direction, with entrances and exits within shots, transitions from enclosed to open spaces, and alignment with characters' gestures and gazes.

The film's division into six parts, each preceded by a title card, serves to inform the viewer of a new moment in the narrative, akin to identifying

chapters in a novel. Additionally, the appearance of intertitles featuring characters' dialogue can be interpreted in the diegetic sense identified by André Gaudreault and François Jost: 'Verbal information contributes to constructing the diegetic world by situating the images we see in time and space, providing us with the interpretive framework within which the unfolding story before our eyes is believable' (1995: 79).

As highlighted by Burch, montage aims to create a seamless flow of images within IMR (1981: 87–88). In 'On the warpath', the use of transitions such as direct cuts, ellipsis and flashbacks demonstrates the classic characteristics of montage:

transparency, narrative simplicity through adherence to linearity and continuity, gradual progression of shots, successive points of view to provide viewers with the clearest possible understanding of the action, straightforward and distinct temporal markers to indicate the passage of time, and a record of movement, direction, and gaze.

(Tollian 2019: 122)

Similarly, the film employs parallel montage, interspersing various actions occurring simultaneously. This technique can be observed in the concluding part, where images of the final battle are interwoven with actions affecting Jurtta, the White Devil and Eliina, thus generating a certain level of narrative tension.

## **THE FILM AND HISTORY: WOMEN IN THE CIVIL WAR**

Pakkala's representation of historical events is skewed; as a conservative, he sided with the Whites. The film is set in a historical moment but does not depict specific historical events. As Rosenstone maintains, historical films are the result of the labour of a production team; it is the scriptwriter and director who contribute their point of view on the events portrayed (2006: 127). The Pakkala film is no exception. As both scriptwriter and director, Pakkala favoured narrative continuity over historical fidelity, as is evident in the depiction of White sympathizers as brave and adventurous, the ideological simplifications, and the use of dramatic devices designed to elicit an emotional reaction to events. Since Pakkala made full use of the mechanisms of cinematographic representation to promote his ideological position, I analyse the discrepancy between the characterization of the two main female characters and the history of women on opposite sides of the Civil War.

In keeping with the conservative orientation of the film, the Red side is shown as chaotic and undisciplined, beginning in the initial sequence. The communist leader Jurtta's visit to a fortune-teller establishes a link between left-wing ideas and superstition, the ultimate expression of the irrational. This allusion is not coincidental. The Whites, in contrast, are presented as guarantors of a national identity in which Christian beliefs are fundamental. The image of Jurtta remains peculiar even after he becomes commander of the Red troops. Contrary to contemporaneous photographic evidence, which shows left-wing militiamen wearing civilian clothing, Pakkala presents an elaborate uniform in which Russian and kitsch influences are mixed. A red bracelet adorned by a skull, a reference to piracy, is highlighted. The film develops this theme by presenting the Red soldiers as thieves who snatch material possessions from their enemies.

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As noted previously, the Red camp is shown to be populated by undisciplined and drunken soldiers. A Russian soldier named Ivan illustrates the presence of Bolshevik troops on the Red side. The fleeting appearance of this character is related to the representation of women and not to that of the military or to ideology. Ivan is shown going into the woods with two Red women to have sex. Pakkala was evidently conscious of the claims of the White side, which cast Red women as promiscuous. For example, an issue of the conservative-oriented newspaper *Aamulehti* ('Morning paper') from 24 April 1918 refers to them as 'whores and Russian brides' (cited in Lintunen 2012: 20).

Pakkala's film is ground-breaking in the Finnish context because it focuses on two female characters, a common practice in American and European cinema in the 1910s (Le Juez and Richardson 2019: 35). In 'On the warpath' Pakkala develops both a female heroine and a female antagonist.

### **The Guerrilla**

During much of the film, the female character known as the Guerrilla – no reference is made to her actual name – is cast as the antagonist. Her anonymity and lack of identification reflect the feeling of contempt that Red women provoked among proponents of the Whites. As Tiina Lintunen contends, conservatives claimed that 'Red women transformed into dreadful beasts when they became warriors' (2008: 180).

A woman in her thirties, the Guerrilla usually wears a dark dress. Like Jurttä, she displays a red bracelet with a skull. In the fifth part of the film, she appears in a dress adorned with lobster-shaped embroidery. This symbol, like the skull, has menacing connotations that apply to the entire Red side, which is associated with evil in the form of theft, sting operations, kidnapping and extortion. From the beginning, however, the Guerrilla appears hesitant and lacking commitment to the cause for which she is fighting. Bourgeois traits are in evidence when she argues with a Red officer to obtain a bathtub. Apparently, she does not engage in combat. For much of the film, she is reduced to the role of companion to the Red leader; at most, she performs espionage work.

Her hesitancy is explained in a flashback to the backstory, another illustration of Pakkala's use of flashback to provide essential information. It reveals that the Guerrilla and the White Devil have known each other since childhood because they belonged to the same social circle. It nevertheless remains unclear how or why the Guerrilla has become a communist, possibly because some footage of the film has been lost. As for her motivation, her encounter with the White Devil in the present time of the film shows that she is driven primarily by her ambiguous feelings for him. She experiences both ideological aversion and idealized love. Passion eventually triumphs in this inner conflict, and the Guerrilla commits suicide to enable the White Devil to escape.

Pakkala's cinematic portrayal of women on the Red side is far removed from reality. The few women who appear in the film's Red camp perform traditionally female tasks: washing clothes, cooking and serving as sexual partners for the soldiers and a Russian officer. Within the conservative imaginary of a strong national character, a woman who had relations with a Russian was a traitor to the nation and the Finnish people (Lintunen 2014: 220). In this sequence and others, Pakkala's presentation of Red women as immoral is in keeping with conservative propaganda. Conversely, the characters he created to represent the White side are entirely in line with conservative ideology.



Figure 2: *The Guerrilla* (Lilli Carén) argues with a commander from the Red camp. Teuvo Pakkala (dir.), *Sotapolulla* ('On the warpath'), 1922. Finland. Courtesy of the National Audiovisual Institute of Finland.

In actuality, when the war began, the Red Guard recruited middle-aged and married women to entrust them with quartering duties. Following the example of their Russian comrades, the women 'saw a new option in front of them: if they could not assist the men, they would join them as equals on the front line' (Lintunen 2014: 214). The command of the Red Guard and the Anti-War Union of Social Democratic Women opposed this development. On 13 March 1918, the Red government acknowledged the existence of such units, but banned the formation of new ones. Lintunen summarizes the period between 13 March and the end of the war:

Armed women guarded the towns to prevent the Whites from sabotaging strategically important objectives. [...] When the Reds suffered defeat after defeat, they were ready to take women from the reserves to front-line attacks. Women took part in the last battles in southern Finland, especially in Helsinki, Tampere, and Viipuri. All in all, there were 2,000 combatant women in the Red Guard during the Civil War.

(2008: 179)

Pakkala deliberately changed the attire of the female soldiers. According to photographic and written testimony, the female Red Guards wore trousers, a garment associated with women's liberation and the struggle for equality (Mattingly 2002: 73). Conservatives perceived women in trousers not only as distasteful, but as morally offensive, as illustrated by a comment from the commander of the German troops who collaborated with the White Guard, General Rudolf von der Göltz: 'Women in trousers in the front lines, many Russian uniforms. The situation was extremely grave. Not even the French are said to have attacked as forcefully as these fanatic supporters of the new evangelism of the uncultured' (1920: 69).

## Eliina

Pakkala also created a conservative female protagonist with a number of idealized and unhistorical features. Unlike the Guerrilla, this character has a Christian name, Eliina, a Finnish variant of the Greek name Helena. Her actions reflect the meaning of the name, 'bright' or 'dazzling', and because she thinks clearly, she supports the 'right' side. Eliina's fearlessness and curiosity conform to the actual age of the actor who played her, Lisi Carén, who was 19. Similarly, her idealized infatuation with the White Devil is commensurate with the behaviour of girls at that age. He is nevertheless a 'suitable' partner, a paradigmatic conservative male who fights for patriotic values, one of which is the protection of women who fulfil their social roles.

Unlike the female characters associated with the Red Guard, Eliina wears men's clothing in the second part of the film, an act that is depicted as justified because the clothes are worn as a disguise during an attempt to infiltrate enemy lines and not as a gendered choice. When Eliina dresses in trousers, she adopts a male role, changing her voice (as suggested by the surprised response of her interlocutors) and making rude gestures. The male posture is convincing, and even her aunt believes she is a boy. Pakkala's position is clear: male clothing is unsuitable for women and has a purpose only when used to construct a fake identity in service of the White cause. Eliina's efforts are successful, and she resumes wearing women's clothing after the infiltration sequence.

Eliina is bold and combative, assuming an active role in determining her future. Her backstory, though somewhat confusing, shows her as a young orphan living with her aunt. The aunt wants her to marry the mayor of the town where they live, something that does not fit into Eliina's plans, not because marriage is unappealing, but because she intends to marry the White Devil. Emotions shape her goals and motivations.



Figure 3: Dressed as a man, Eliina (Lisi Carén, left) performs the role so convincingly that even her aunt is deceived. Teuvo Pakkala (dir.), Sotapolulla ('On the warpath'), 1922. Finland. Courtesy of the National Audiovisual Institute of Finland.

Like the *Guerrilla*, the film's Eliina is far removed from historical reality. Women's participation in the White Guard was in line with traditional gender roles. According to Lintunen, their efforts included nursing the wounded and gathering supplies for the troops. The most arduous task they undertook was to prepare corpses before they were sent to relatives. The request of some women to fight was rejected by General Gustaf Mannerheim, leader of the White army:

I expect help from the Finnish women for the various dreadful needs of the army like nursing, making clothes, taking care of the home, and comforting those who have lost their loved ones. Whereas armed fighting at the front I regard as an exclusive privilege and duty of a man.

(Mannerheim cited in Lintunen 2014: 208)

By portraying Eliina as engaging in combat and espionage, enabling the White troops to launch a surprise attack on the enemy, Pakkala subverts the reality of the Civil War.

### LITERARY AND CINEMATIC PROTOTYPES

As noted previously, during the silent era, Finnish film directors frequently drew on literary works. Among them were the pioneering plays of Minna Canth promoting socialism and the feminist struggle (Sangster 2021: 143). In 1911, filming began of two of her most important works, *Sylvi*, directed by Teuvo Puro, and *Anna-Liisa*, directed by Teppo Raikas, although only *Sylvi* was released for distribution (1913); the material filmed for *Anna-Liisa* was lost (Soila 2005: 27). Canth's plays and the film adaptation of *Sylvi* focus on a leading female character, a practice that was common internationally (Salmi 2005: 33). The literary connection in Finnish cinema meant that 'mentally and physically strong female characters' appeared regularly, as Kääpä points out (2012: 75).

Widely distributed serials starring women appeared during the 1910s in France and the United States, including the Gaumont serial *Les Vampires*, directed by Louis Feuillade in 1915–16 and featuring Musidora, and *The Perils of Pauline* (Gasnier and MacKenzie 1914) and *The Exploits of Elaine* (Gasnier et al. 1914), both starring Pearl White. The proactive characters that White played disrupted the conventional model of femininity. According to Daniel Eagan:

White's character in *The Perils of Pauline* is cheerful, active and head-strong, an exciting change from the pale, cosseted, Victorian heroines favoured by D. W. Griffith. A paradigm of the 'new woman' exposed in magazines of the time, she can race a horse, drive a car, and put up a fight when attacked.

(2010: 36)

In keeping with these cinematic predecessors, the two important female characters in Pakkala's 'On the warpath' possess traits that would define the cinema of the 1920s in that they are 'strong and independent or at least rebellious' (Iversen et al. 1998: 97). The *Guerrilla* represents negative aspects of this paradigm. Although she wears a dress rather than the trousers worn by actual women in the Red Guard, this feminine attire is associated with undesirable traits. The *Guerrilla* willingly becomes the mistress of the communist

commander. Her use of weapons links her to the bad-girl archetype and the degradation of women in the conservative Finnish imaginary. In the social context of the post-war years, 'the winning side deeply hated armed women, and treated them accordingly' (Siltala 2009: 16). Thus the narrative of the film assigns the Guerrilla a doomed role; suicide is the only way she can escape her feelings of rejection and the imminent victory of the conservative side. For Pakkala, women like the Guerrilla had no place in post-war society. Her ideological choice, communism, makes her expendable, like the character Irma Vep in Feuillade's serial *Les Vampires*. In both cases, the character is 'a woman with wrong morals, in that she goes against the rules of the established order' (Fleckinger 2010: 270).<sup>2</sup>

The character of the heroine Eliina is more complex. On the one hand, she reflects the positive traits that Pakkala had established in his literary characters. Eliina displays certain similarities to Liisa Latun, a recurring character in his works set in Vaara, a working-class district of Oulu: 'Vaara: Pictures from the outskirts', 'Elsa: Descriptions of life in Vaara' and *Lapsia: kokoelma novelleja lasten parista* ('Children: A collection of short stories') (Pakkala 1895). Like Liisa, Eliina is 'a physically strong, stubborn girl who challenges traditional gender roles' (Miettinen 2014: 57). She is familiar with the use of men's clothes, she has an adventurous spirit, and she intends to marry a man who represents order and stability.

On the other hand, Eliina resembles the serial queen of contemporary American productions. In 1914, United Artists opened an office in Helsinki. The most famous serials were subsequently shown in Finnish cinemas, including the Pearl White serials, both from 1914 (Dahlquist 2013: 4). Finnish audiences were thus introduced to the serial-queen character and narratives that follow a predictable pattern: 'The action inevitably revolved around a heroine in danger who went to unusual lengths to save herself or someone she loved [...]. The heroines in these films participated in many activities usually reserved for male characters' (Neroni 2005: 16).

Eliina has many traits that connect her to characters in American film. She is a young woman, an orphan living with her aunt. Mary Pickford played similar characters in *A Romance of the Redwoods* (DeMille 1917) and *Stella Maris* (Neilan 1918), which premiered several years before 'On the warpath'. Characteristics of the serial queen are evident in Eliina's development: she is strong and brave (Stamp 2004: 218) and possesses many qualities associated with men, such as 'endurance, self-reliance, courage, social authority, and freedom to explore novel experiences outside the domestic sphere' (Singer 2001: 221). She acquires these traits both when dressed as a woman and disguised as a man, in keeping with the occasional cross-dressing of the serial queen (Knight 2010: 16). That said, the film makes it clear that men's clothing is to be used as disguise to fulfil a temporary mission and not to promote gender equality.

Eliina sometimes exhibits limitations associated with her gender, shortcomings that Knight identifies as typical of the serial queen (2010: 15–16). These include fatigue after significant exertion and emotional vulnerability in the aftermath of certain events. These weaknesses are juxtaposed with her heroism. In male disguise and pretending to be a communist, she leads Red rebels into an ambush planned by the Whites, but later faints upon receiving the news that the White Devil has been captured. A significant feature of this type of character is her interaction with the *mise en scène*. As Hilary Neroni writes about the serial queen, '[t]he films depict her at first in the domestic

2. Historically, women in Finland had been active participants in the labour movement and had advocated for social and economic equality. However, the conservative forces that emerged victorious in the Civil War sought to reinforce traditional gender roles, emphasizing the importance of women's domestic roles over their participation in the public sphere. This shift notably impacted women's access to education, employment opportunities and political participation. In the immediate post-war period, women who had collaborated with the Red side, whether or not they were combatants, were accused of treason, put on trial and sentenced to prison terms or executed without trial. See Lintunen (2008: 201–29) and Risto Alapuro (2015: 17–42).



Figure 4: Eliina (Lisi Carén) with her romantic interest, the White Devil (Yrjö Hirviseppä) and members of her family in an idyllic setting that illustrates the consolidation of traditional values – family and homeland – after the conflict. Teuvo Pakkala (dir.), *Sotapolulla* ('On the warpath'), 1922, Finland. Screen grab. Courtesy of the National Audiovisual Institute of Finland.

sphere and then depict her adventure in various rural or urban environments, as she follows her free spirit' (2005: 16). The character of Eliina is presented similarly. In domestic spaces she adopts a demure attitude that nevertheless is mitigated by her personal preferences: she rejects the marriage proposal that her aunt presses her to accept and later expresses her own emotional commitment to the White Devil. Her adventures and heroic acts unfold in dramatic natural spaces that in conservative ideology were an essential feature of Finnishness.

Despite Eliina's independent actions and involvement in matters conventionally assigned to men, Pakkala chose to conclude her story with a classic finale, an upcoming marriage, the 'appropriate' ultimate objective. Pakkala also used this conclusion for Liisa Latun. By extension, marriage promotes the interests of the social order. By the widely held standard of the early twentieth century, no matter how transgressive and assertive a woman might be, her only reasonable choice and long-term goal was to be linked to a man and a home.

## CONCLUSIONS

'On the warpath' should be of considerable interest to scholars of silent film history for several reasons. Pakkala's film employs a narrative that is inspired by the Hollywood model: it follows a linear structure and uses analeptic resources (flashbacks) to explain situations and to provide information about certain characters. This technique, familiar to Pakkala from his writing, demonstrates the influence of the mechanisms of literature on the configuration of film narration. Pakkala also developed themes intended to please the public, thus keeping in mind the commercial side of cinema. Audiences

of early Finnish films liked dramas that were set in rural areas and featured extensive shots of landscapes, as did 'On the warpath', as well as literary adaptations. 'On the warpath' is not a literary adaptation, but the director's background as a novelist presumably helped him create complex characters. The Finnish public was also familiar with the type of female characters around whom the story revolves.

Pakkala presents an ideological discourse that accords with his views and his vision of the winning side in the conflict. The role that women play in the conservative social order is ultimately subservient to men who, as representatives of the nation, must protect them. That said, the importance of women's participation in the social and political events that formed the nation is also identified clearly. Pakkala did not ignore a reality that manifested itself in a novel way in Finland, namely the 1906 adoption of egalitarian and universal suffrage and the election of the first-ever female parliamentarians in 1907. In short, the portrayal of Eliina is ultimately a tribute to the period in which society came to depend on the presence and participation of women.

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