

# As if Alive before Us: The Pleasures of Verisimilitude in Biographical Fiction Films

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## Introduction

The biopic, or biographical fiction film, is characterised by the real or historical person as a protagonist (Custen 5; Taylor 22; Bingham, *Whose Lives* 8). Despite the acknowledged potential for artistic freedom in fiction film, this generic feature—the reference to the real world—informs the genre. Film-makers, reviewers and film scholars repeatedly ask, how truthful or verisimilar a portrayal, an actor or a performance is or how well a biographical film depicts a historical story. Traditionally, film-makers have defined “the degree of truth” of a film at its opening (Custen 51). A title card or a voice-over might assert that the film follows known facts. The declaration can serve as a disclaimer, where the audience is informed that a film is only inspired by real events or the story is only partly factual. Thus, it is possible to specify a biopic as fictional. In any case, some definition is expected. Contemporary newspaper criticism commonly estimates the truthfulness and verisimilitude of a film. If a film portrays a famous or respected public figure, the authenticity of the depiction will almost inevitably be debated. In addition, the truthfulness and verisimilitude of biopics are constantly discussed in scholarly criticism. George F. Custen, in his seminal book *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, devotes a whole chapter to the discussion of the relationship between a real person and a protagonist in a film (110–47). His aim is to illustrate how certain circumstances of the film industry shaped the biopics of the studio era. However, in many studies, these conditions of production are considered problems and biopics are seen to distort history (see Rosenstone, *Visions*; Tweg; Doherty; Brottman; Thomson; Lynch). Even where misrepresentations are not considered problematic, the relationship with the real world is actively discussed. Typically, critics declare that it is crucial to ask why facts have been altered and what these alterations mean (see Custen 118–28; Stetz; Burns; Mazierska; Bingham, “I do Want to Live”).

In contrast to an approach that discusses the biopic as a form of visual historiography (see e.g. Rosenstone, *Visions*) or dwells on reasons for the distortions of truth in biopics (see e.g. Custen), this article focuses on the pleasures the references to the real world and verisimilitude can afford. Using one of the first Finnish

biopics, *Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu* (The King of Poetry and a Migrant Bird, 1940) as an example, it elucidates how verisimilitude forms an essential feature of the film and is a basis of an enjoyable cinematic experience.

### **Cultural Verisimilitude: The Generic Rule of Biographical Film**

Steve Neale has used the concept of verisimilitude in discussing the generic systems of cinema. According to Neale, a film genre consists of the expectations and hypotheses of audiences, as well as of films. The expectations help a spectator to read a film, to understand why it looks as it does and why its characters behave in a certain way (*Genre* 31–32). Neale has suggested that the system of expectations utilises various regimes of verisimilitude, “various systems of plausibility, motivation, justification and belief” (32). In addition, the concept entails the notion of appropriateness. If something in a film is appropriate, it is plausible (32). Neale builds on Tzvetan Todorov’s two types of verisimilitude: generic and social/cultural (82–83). Generic verisimilitude refers to the codes or rules of a genre that a text has to follow in order to be plausible. Social and cultural verisimilitude is connected to public opinion, in that it is achieved wherever people believe a text to be true. Todorov stressed that this does not mean that social and cultural verisimilitude is the same as being true or real, but that it corresponds to discourses considered to be true. Neale (“Questions” 47–48) observes that both regimes of verisimilitude may reside in a film, but there are tensions between them. In certain genres the generic regimes of verisimilitude typically transgress social and cultural regimes. For example, in horror films and fantasy films, there are fantastic elements not encountered in the real world. Other genres based on cultural verisimilitude are war films and historical dramas which utilise authentic locations, contemporary costumes and well-known historical stories.

The cultural regimes of verisimilitude characterise biographical fiction film. I would suggest that in a biopic the generic regimes of verisimilitude overlap with these cultural regimes: a film is recognised as biographical film if it is considered to have references to the real world. Of course, a biographical fiction film always dramatises and (audio)visualises a life. As Henry M. Taylor, who has made a comprehensive study of narration in biographical films, notes, a biopic has three narratological challenges. Firstly, it usually has to tell a life story in two hours. Secondly, a life, in its entirety, is seldom very dramatic. Thirdly, the life of a protagonist has to be (audio)visualised, even if the protagonist is a writer whose daily work does not seem and sound spectacular (Taylor 114; see also Rosenstone, “In Praise” 14). Furthermore, a biopic builds a fictional character out of a public figure through narrative and cinematic means (Bingham, *Whose Lives* 10; Taylor 160–65). In short, a biopic constructs an interpretation of a person and a life (Rosenstone, “In Praise”). The dramatisation and (audio)visualisation can be understood as a part of the generic regimes of biographical film. However, in order to be categorised as a biopic, a film has to have certain culturally verisimilar elements in it, be it the name of a real person, recognisable events or the traits of the person.

This does not mean that the film has to be narrated in a realistic style. Cultural verisimilitude can be achieved through characterisation, dialogue, certain details of the plot or achieved at the thematic level.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, biopics are usually generic hybrids (Man v), and the balance between the generic and cultural regimes of verisimilitude may vary. For instance, a biopic can also be a musical (*De-Lovely*, 2004), a crime film (*Public Enemies*, 2009), a romance (*Bright Star*, 2009) or a spectacular epic (*Alexander*, 2004). Generic conventions can undermine the plausibility of a film built on cultural verisimilitude, but if the references to the real person and the real life can be recognised, a film can still be considered a biopic.

Biopics operate at the border between fact and fiction which are, according to common sense, opposites defined by each other (Lehtonen 97–99, 100–01). The opposition embodies the modern hierarchy of values, which ranks fact at the top. In cinema, the hierarchy has appeared in the ranking of genres, the more cultural regimes of verisimilitude are emphasised, the more a genre is appreciated. Fantasy and its recurring generic conventions have marked certain films as ‘only’ entertainment (Neale, “Questions” 47–48; Paget 17–18). Although Neale does not subscribe to this hierarchy himself (see *Genre* 35–36), he connects verisimilitude and pleasure: “It is often the generically verisimilitudinous ingredients of a film [. . . ]—singing and dancing in the musical, the appearance of the monster in the horror film—that constitute its pleasure, and that thus attract the audience to the film in the first place” (Neale, “Questions” 48).<sup>2</sup>

However, it is important that film history and the analysis of a film do not reproduce the hierarchies and values of the contemporary culture. The opposition between fact and fiction is an historical and constructed phenomenon. The meanings connected to the opposition should not be taken for granted: factual does not mean non-entertaining. It should not be assumed that only fictional or excessive audiovisual elements have something to do with cinematic pleasures. It is equally important to analyse cultural verisimilitude as a source of entertainment and enjoyment. In the case of a biographical film, it is even essential to do that if one wants to discuss the features and appeal of the genre. I shall elaborate on the idea of the pleasures of cultural verisimilitude in greater detail in the next three chapters.

### **A New Intriguing Genre: The Biopic Arrives in Finland**

The case of *Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu* is particularly interesting in the Finnish context, for at the time the production plan was made public in the spring of 1937, it was the first biographical fiction film to be produced in Finland. Furthermore, the film portraying the life of the Finnish “national poet” Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804–77) was vigorously debated and eagerly expected even before it arrived in

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<sup>1</sup>Derek Jarman’s film *Wittgenstein* (1993), for example, portrays the philosopher’s life and ideas plausibly using very stylised expression.

<sup>2</sup>Interestingly, it could be claimed that this is true in the case of a biopic too. If cultural verisimilitude defines the genre of the biographical film, if it is a genre in which generic and cultural verisimilitude overlap, then cultural verisimilitude is a generic feature that could be seen as a source of pleasure.

cinemas in the autumn of 1940. The film was an expensive, prestigious production of Suomen Filmitoimisto, one of the two major film studios in Finland. In the late thirties, the Finnish film industry had experienced an economic boom. The country had recovered from the Great Depression, and people could afford to go to the cinema. The two major production companies, Suomi-Filmi and Suomen Filmitoimisto, could invest in new technology, employ professional experts and increase production. Even the minor production companies could produce more films in this era than ever before. Although the Second World War and the post-war depression then complicated film production, production rates remained high, and the ratings of domestic films even increased during wartime. Thus, despite the difficulties, the period from the late 1930s to the beginning of the 1950s was known as ‘the golden age of Finnish cinema’.

The good times enabled more ambitious and expensive productions, such as historical films. Three or four films out of about sixteen produced per year were set in the past, which was considerable in the Finnish context.<sup>3</sup> *Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu* was a part of this boom. Biographical film, however, was not a common genre during the golden age of cinema in Finland: seven biographical fiction films premiered between 1938 and 1949. With its prestigious production plan, Suomen Filmitoimisto followed international models and production trends. Such biopics as *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), *Leise flehen meine Lieder* (1933), *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936) or *Fire over England* (1937) were well-received by Finnish critics.

In addition, Suomen Filmitoimisto was influenced by the domestic culture, which favoured historical and national themes. Before and during the Second World War, the Finnish film industry drew its inspiration from the past. Various historical depictions were popular with audiences and the depictions of the national past fostered national sentiments. A patriotic historical topic increased the prestige of films and production companies. This in turn strengthened the companies’ position both within the industry and the culture at large (Laine 249–51).

Runeberg held a special position in Finnish culture at the time his biopic was made. He had written the words for the national anthem, *Maamme-laulu*, and published an influential anthology of poems on the Finnish War (1808–09), *Fänrik Ståls sånger* (The Tales of Ensign Stål). Runeberg exemplified the cult of the ‘great man’, both during his lifetime and subsequently until the end of the Second World War (Hirn 147, 151, 207–08, 261; Klinge 97, 209). For the national elite especially, he epitomised the best of Finnish (Swedish-speaking) culture, and proved that Finland was a Western civilisation with a culture of its own. Nevertheless, the idea for the film caused sensation. Not only was it the first Finnish fiction film to depict the life of an historical person, but Runeberg’s status as a national hero meant that misrepresentations would cause outrage and, in the worst case, legal action. According to Finnish legislation on film censorship, presenting nationally significant historical figures disrespectfully in a film was forbidden. In such a case,

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<sup>3</sup>The total number of films produced varied from 11 to 21 between the years 1937 and 1950.

the film could be banned, which would lead to substantial financial losses for the production company (“Opetusministeriön päätös”, no. 334/1935, 7, 8, 11). The story in this particular film was also sensitive. It told of Runeberg’s affair with a young woman, Emilié Björkstén when he was a married middle-aged man and she a young friend of the family. The story is based on a controversial book, which is why the literary elite and part of the press virulently opposed the production plan. The elite claimed that the affair was not proven fact and thus should not be presented to a national audience. It argued that such a story would offend the national sensibilities of the Finnish people. Newspapers reported that the academic elite formed a delegation that appealed to Suomen Filmitoimisto not to produce the film (Lehtisalo 415–16).

Although controversy over the film created a risk for the production company, it also brought publicity and generated interest in the film. Suomen Filmitoimisto had a chance to promote the film and emphasise the sincere aims and professionalism of the studio. In order to do this, it stressed the historical facts, the film’s authenticity, and its patriotic atmosphere as well as the effort to be made during the production (Lehtisalo 83–86). The film company was not only defending itself, but also creating the generic system of biographical film in the Finnish context.

Promotional publicity for *Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu* generated expectations about the film. Because the genre had no previous Finnish examples, Suomen Filmitoimisto explained its production plan by referring to British, German and French “cultural historical films”, in particular films portraying Chopin and Schubert. Suomen Filmitoimisto claimed that such films had “mitä suurin eurooppalaista kulttuurintunnetta syventävä vaikutus” [“deepened sentiments about European culture”], and consequently ”ovat toteuttaneet taiteellisesti mitä tärkeintä tehtävää” (“Suuren runoilijan rakkaus”, *SF-Uutiset*) [“fulfilled the most important role of art”]. In this way, the production company defined the film and the genre it represented to be as prestigious and its own production as state-of-the-art.

Cultural verisimilitude had a central role in producing the generic expectations in promotional publicity for the film. The promotional materials claimed that there would be portrayals of historical figures, authentic locations, period costumes and period settings. On the one hand, the studio tried to convince the audience that the visual, aural and narrative elements in the film were authentic or at least resembled the past. It expected that the audience already knew the historical figures or what ladies’ costumes looked like in the middle of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, culturally verisimilitudinous elements could be neither recognised nor appreciated without foreknowledge. So the audience had to be informed that certain features were authentic or factual. As the promotional publicity presented promises of authenticity and historical truth, it simultaneously made promises of pleasure. Mentions of period costume implied visual splendour and expected historical facts in the film were to offer opportunities for recognition and feelings of competence.

The authenticity and pleasure was thought to be guaranteed by the work of film professionals. Articles in film magazines reported how much research the

film demanded. This 'research discourse' was not only a response to the criticism the production plan had aroused, but also a way to differentiate the film from B-productions and those of rival companies. The promoted research corresponded to the situation in America, though in Finnish studios there were no research departments like those in Hollywood (Rosen 148–55; Custen 111–18). In Finland, the research was done on the side by directors, scriptwriters, set designers, costume designers and location managers. Although the industry had fewer resources than Hollywood, the research discourse was meant to demonstrate that the Finnish film industry was state-of-the-art and that its film-makers were professionals.

The research discourse was manifest particularly in Suomen Filmiteollisuus's own magazine *SF-Uutiset*. The producer-director T. J. Särkkä introduced the project with following words:

Tämä filmi kuvailee erästä, kaikessa inhimillisyydessään mielenkiintoista episodina kansallisorunoilijamme J. L. Runebergin elämässä. Taustana elämä ja olot Suomessa noin 100 vuotta sitten. Aihe on äärettömän vaikea ja arkaluontoinen, mutta vaikeudessaan tekijöitään sitä innoittavampi. Toivon Runeberg-filmistä muodostuvan erään merkkipylvään suomalaisen elokuvataiteen historiassa. Joka tapauksessa se on vakava yritys kansallisen kulttuuriaiheen valtaamiseksi suomalaiseen filmiin. ("SF:n mielenkiintoinen tuotanto-ohjelma", *SF-Uutiset*)

[This film depicts a human interest episode in the life of our national poet J. L. Runeberg. The context reveals life in Finland approximately one hundred years ago. The topic is extremely demanding and delicate, hence more inspiring for us film-makers. I hope that the Runeberg film will become a milestone in Finnish film history. In any case, it is a serious attempt to introduce a national cultural topic to Finnish cinema.]

Later on, the scriptwriter, author Elsa Soini, explained in the same magazine,

Tein töitä yhtä ahkerasti yliopiston kirjastossa kuin kotonani, hankin kokonaisia lähdekirjapinoja ja kahlasin ne kaikki läpi. Toiset niistä m.m. Strömborgin laaja Runeberg-elämäkerta sekä August Schaumanin 'Ur sex årtionden' oli tutkittava huolellisesti kuin konsanaan tenttiä varten, sillä ne tulivat päälähteikseni. ("Miten 'Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu' syntyi", *SF-Uutiset*)

[I worked hard both in the university library and at home, I obtained piles of source books and ploughed through them. Some, like the voluminous biography made by Strömborg and August Schauman's 'Ur sex årtionden', had to be studied as if for an examination, because they became my major sources.]

Authenticity and pleasure were intertwined when the leading actors were presented to the audience. The promotional publicity anticipated enjoyable star performances as well as a satisfying resemblance between the stars and the historical figures. According to the articles, the leading actors were perfectly suited (see Dyer

129) to the roles of Runeberg and Björkstén. They not only looked like the protagonists, but their characters resembled them too: ”Joskus sattuu, että näyttelijän tielle osuu rooli, johon hän voi täydellisesti eläytyä, joka jollakin lailla on lähellä häntä itseänsä. Emilie on tällainen osa; senpä takia sitä voi hyvällä syyllä kutsua Ansa Ikosen loisto-osaksi” (”Aatamin puvusta ja vähän muustakin”, *Elokuva-Aitta*) [”Sometimes it happens that an actor is given a role into which she can put her soul, a role which is somehow close to her. Emilie is such a role; therefore, it could be called a prime part for Ansa Ikonen”]. Ansa Ikonen was the major film star in Finland: she was enormously popular and at the peak of her career in 1940. The part of Runeberg was played by Eino Kaipainen, a well-known and esteemed actor, who was apparently made for the role: ”Eino Kaipainen muistuttaa todella hämmästyttävästi jo ulkomuodoltaankin nuorta Runebergia. Kun lisäksi muistamme hänen lämpimän, soinnukkaan äänensä ja lyrillisen miehekkyytensä, uskomme mielellämme, että hänen Runeberginsa pystyy antamaan elämää ja väriä vakiintuneille mielikuvillemme” (”Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu”, *Kuva*) [”Eino Kaipainen bears an astonishing resemblance to the young Runeberg. What is more, when we remember his warm, resonant voice and his lyrical masculinity, we are happy to believe that Kaipainen’s Runeberg could enliven our established images [of Runeberg]”].

The visual pleasures of verisimilitude were emphasised by Ansa Ikonen, who told the local newspaper *Uusimaa*:

Tällainen työ on luonnollisesti vaatinut suuria esivalmisteluja. Kaikkea on tutkittava . . . Ja pukuja on täytynyt valmistaa suuri määrä . . . Jotta taas niistä olisi saatu täysin sen aikaisia vastaavat on suoritettu laajoja tutkimuksia. Sen ajan kuvien ja muiden tietolähteiden pohjalla on kaikki tehty . . . tutkimuksia aina Pariisissa asti. (”Runeberg ja Emilie Björkstén”, *Uusimaa*)

[Naturally this kind of work has demanded a great deal of preliminary preparation. Everything had to be studied. [ . . . ] And a multitude of costumes had to be prepared. [ . . . ] Extensive studies were undertaken in order to have period costumes. Contemporary pictures and sources were used [ . . . ] and studies were made as far away as Paris.]

Ikonen not only emphasised the verisimilitude of the forthcoming film, but implied that the costumes would be splendid and of Parisian design. A promotional article in the film magazine *Elokuvalukemisto* put it more frankly:

Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu on todellinen kulttuurielokuva, joka tulee herättämään valtavaa mielenkiintoa koko maassa ja maan rajojen ulkopuolellakin. Tämä, Runebergin nuoruudenrakkautta kuvaava elokuva, on loistava pukufilmi biedermeier-miljöössä. Siinä on menneen vuosisadan loistoa, harrastatutunnelmaa, rakkauslauluja ja kaihomielisyyttä, joka tehoaa väkevästi nykyisen vuosisadan proosallisiin ihmisiin. Ja pääosissa koko Suomen rakastama ja ihailema pikku Ansa Ikonen ja miehekäs Eino Kaipainen. (”Loistava kulttuurielokuva”, *Elokuvalukemisto*)

[*Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu* is a real culture film which will evoke immense interest in the country and even abroad. The film, portraying the love

story of Runeberg's youth, is a costume extravaganza in a Biedermeier setting. There is the splendour of the past century, a fabulous pious atmosphere, love songs and nostalgia, which will have exquisite appeal for the prosaic people of the present century. And in the leading roles are little Ansa Ikonen, loved and admired by the whole of Finland, and the manly Eino Kaipainen.]

*Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu* and its marketing convinced the audience. Despite the ambiguity of the film project, it was a success. The film was praised by film critics all over Finland. It got the best ratings among Finnish films premiering in 1940 (Uusitalo 574). Even those critics who had doubted whether the film should be made now admitted that their fears had been groundless. For instance, an author *H. K.* wrote in the quality Swedish-language daily *Hufvudstadsbladet* that “Det var inte utan onda aningar man begav sig till Runebergfilmens premier . . . Ty det må genast vara sagt: ‘Skaldekonungen och flyttfågeln’ är en i allo diskret film” (“Skaldekonungen och flyttfågeln”, *Hufvudstadsbladet*) [“Not without misgivings did I enter the premiere of the Runeberg film. [ . . . ] But I have to say straight-away: *Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu* is in every respect a discreet film”]. The author *M. L.*, in the national farmers' newspaper *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus*, had feared that the film would disgrace the object of his youthful admiration, but at the end of his review he conceded: “Tämä kulttuurihistoriallinen valtavaan ja aitoon isänmaalliseen paatokseen kohoava elokuva on lopultakin kotimainen ‘täysosuma’, jota uskaltaa suositella kenelle hyvänsä” (“*Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu*”, *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus*) [“This cultural historical film reaches grand and genuine patriotic pathos. It is, after all, a domestic ‘hit’, which one dares to recommend to anybody”].

### The Enjoyable Balance

*Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu* was carefully made over three years, whereas the production process of a Finnish film company typically took approximately one year or even less. Although the Winter War (1939–40) might have delayed preparations, the main reasons for the long production process were the prestigious status of the film and the criticism it aroused, which led to extra caution. For example, the scriptwriter Elsa Soini wrote several versions of the script (Soini).<sup>4</sup> Besides the script, the *mise en scène*—set, costumes, lighting and compositions—was refined so that *Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu* met the generic verisimilitude of historical drama. A spectator could find familiar generic ingredients in the film where visual and aural pleasures came to the fore: the life of nineteenth-century upper-class society, the luxurious set and costumes, balls and soirées (see, e.g., Harper). The richness in style and in filmic expression was evidently inspired by foreign examples. The homes and shots on location were beautifully designed, the space filled with decorative tapestries, candlesticks, chandeliers, paintings and ornaments. Harmonious compositions were intensified by soft lighting. The film studio had acquired

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<sup>4</sup>Ansa Ikonen stated in her memoirs that Elsa Soini agonised over the writing process because she was uncertain about “what to tell” (Saarikoski 74).



new equipment, which made possible a sense of space by enabling smoother camera movements (Töyri 134). The manners of upper-class society and the known historical events were portrayed at a tranquil pace creating an idyllic atmosphere.<sup>5</sup>

These elements of generic verisimilitude simultaneously create cultural verisimilitude. Both intertwined regimes of verisimilitude aimed at cinematic pleasure. The style of the film and the consistently verisimilar *mise en scène* provide an enjoyable engagement with the diegesis (Sargeant 214). There are, however, deviations from cultural verisimilitude in the film. Kara McKechnie, who has studied royal biopics, has suggested that the cultural verisimilitude of a *mise en scène* ensures a sufficient level of authenticity that more artistic freedom can be taken with a story (219). This seems to be the case with *Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu*.

The deviations are motivated by a desire for a more fluent narration, by the generic pleasures of melodramatic romance and by ideological and economical considerations. For example, the duration of the relationship between Runeberg and Björkstén is compressed into a few years, whereas actually they were friends for several decades after the love affair had faded. In order to motivate the romance, the character of Fredrika, Runeberg's wife, was altered so that the famous writer and intellectual was depicted as a bland old woman whose only interest is housekeeping. To stress the national significance of Runeberg's work, the film ends by showing Runeberg at a patriotic feast on Flora Day (13 May 1848), when the national anthem of Finland, *Maamme-laulu*, was sung for the first time in public. The historical fact is that he was not present at the feast. Nationalistic respect for the 'national poet' made the characterisation of Runeberg and Kaipainen's performance quite restrained. This exemplifies the appropriateness of verisimilitude: a rounded character and the overly intimate portrait of the national hero would not have been appropriate or plausible at that time in Finland. A notable historical distortion is that Runeberg and his society speak in Finnish in the film, although the Runebergs and the nineteenth-century upper-class were generally Swedish-speaking. The language of the film was, however, an economic decision since most of the spectators in 1940 were Finnish-speaking and although subtitles could have been used, it was more convenient for them to listen to the dialogue than read it.

Many contemporary reviewers recognised the distortions of historical fact, for Runeberg's life and the national history of the nineteenth-century were a part of a general education. Although some alterations caused annoyance—for instance the portrayal of Fredrika Runeberg—the reviewers generally accepted the distortions. They understood the demands of generic verisimilitude on the dramatisation and the characterisation, appreciated the appropriate portrayal of the national hero, and admired the cultural verisimilitude of the film (Lehtisalo 86, 132, 134, 222, 277). According to critical reception, the film had right balance between the different

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<sup>5</sup>The audiovisual expression of the film is similar in style to that Andrew Higson (37, 39) has connected with the notion of heritage film. As with some British period films of the 1980s and 1990s, the style of *Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu* could be called pictorialist, and it celebrates Finnish cultural heritage from the nineteenth century.

regimes of verisimilitude, and it provided a pleasurable cinematic experience by offering immersion in the idyllic past.

### **The Pleasures of the Moment**

In a biographical film, reference to the real world is a salient feature and historical person as a protagonist constantly reminds spectators of the real world. Alongside the pleasures of immersion, spectators enjoy following the actions of the character known to correspond to the real world. This knowledge may rupture the diegesis (Taylor 18) but instead of dealing with the disruption of cinematic experience or the intellectual intervention in escapist illusions, could it be that the reference to the real world and its verisimilar realisation might entail specific cinematic pleasures? The recurrent discourse on factuality and cultural verisimilitude in connection with biographical film demonstrates that these features are expected and even eagerly anticipated. The promotion of *Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu* created these expectations by describing how the film would not only repeat the schoolbook history, but also afford a sensory experience of the past: spectators would see, hear and feel the authentic past. “Se herättää uudelleen henkiin meneen vuosisadan loiston, sen hauraan satutunnelman ja traditiot, joita nykyaika ei tunne” [“It re-animates the splendour of the past century, its fragile, fabulous atmosphere and the traditions not known by the present”], promised the promotional article in the film magazine *Suomen Kinolehti* (“Kaksi suurta kulttuurikuva”, *Suomen Kinolehti*). In the film, there are two types of scenes where a sense of the ‘authentic’ past is foregrounded: private soirées or balls and public, historical public events. These culturally verisimilitudinous scenes focus on a supposedly historical moment in order to give spectators a sensory impression of the past re-emerging in front of them. The soirée held by the Runebergs exemplifies such a scene. At the beginning of the scene, a party is seen mingling in the richly decorated parlour. Spectators can enjoy the atmosphere of the nineteenth-century gentry soirée with piano music and duets, as well as pick out the famous historical figures from the party. The scene culminates in Runeberg’s (Eino Kaipainen) reciting his famous poem in a melodic voice. The camera moves closer to him, and for a short moment all attention is focused on the reading, as though spectators are witnessing the authentic moment when the well-known poem was created.

In the ceremonious scenes, spectators are invited to re-live famous historical events, like the feast of Flora Day. The feast scene opens with an establishing shot, which depicts a park filled with students and gentry. One can see long banqueting tables and hear the singing students. When the professor of the university, Fredrik Cygnaeus, gives his famed patriotic speech on the rostrum, the camera portrays him from a low angle as if spectators were present by the rostrum, looking up to the professor. After the speech, people start to sing the Finnish national anthem. Although the narration does not halt in these scenes of supposed cultural verisimilitude, in both scenes tempo of the narration decelerates and the camera concentrates on showing more than narrating.

Many contemporary reviewers were enchanted by these historical scenes. The author with the pseudonym *S. L.* praised the film in the quality Finnish-language daily *Uusi Suomi*: “1840-luvun Porvoon elämä esitetään suurella harrastuksella ja huolella, esim. Runebergin kotona pidettyjen kutsujen kuvaus tuntuu todella olevan kappale elokuvanauhalle kiinnitettyä kulttuurihistoriaa” (“Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu”, *Uusi Suomi*) [“Life in Porvoo in the 1840s is depicted with great interest and care, for example the portrayal of the soiree held by the Runebergs really feels like cultural history put on screen”]. According to the author *P. T.* in the provincial newspaper *Ilkka*, “runebergilainen ilmapiiri” [“the Runebergian atmosphere”] is intensified by the appearance of other famous historical figures such as Elias Lönnroth and M. A. Castrén (“Taide. Runeberg-elokuva Kinossa”, *Ilkka*). Likewise enthused, the author *L. S.* writes,

Eteemme avautuu valkokankaalla kokonainen aikakausi maamme sivistyselämästä, suuret miehemme Topelius, Cygnaeus, Castren ja Lönnrot vilahtavat ohitsemme viime vuosisadan elämäntaustaa vasten, vanha Porvoo, suuren runoilijamme kaupunki levittäytyy eteemme ja keskeisinä hahmoina tässä taideluomassa kohoavat Runeberg, arkielämässään ja keskellä runollista luomustyötään ja hänen rinnallaan Emilie Björkstén, hänen innoittajansa ja lyhytaikaisen, runollisen rakkaustarinansa päähenkilö. (“Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu”, *Helsingin Sanomat*)

[On screen we see the period cultural life of our country, the great men, Topelius, Cygnaeus, Castren and Lönnrot, move before us in the context of the past century, old Porvoo, the town of our great poet unfolds before us, and Runeberg, in his everyday life and in the middle of his creative poetic work, and by his side Emilie Björkstén, his muse and the main character of his brief, lyric love story emerge as the central figures of this work of art.]

The author *J. V.* explains his feelings about *Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu* in the student magazine *Ylioppilaslehti* in the following terms:

Me kuulumme Runebergin itsensä lausuvan Döbelniään ja me todella tunsimme ja vaistosimme hänet juuri Runebergiksi. Näimme Fredrik Cygnaeuksen astuvan Floran-päiväjuhlan puhujakorokkeelle, kuulumme hänen puhuvan ja silloin me todella tiesimme, että siinä sillä hetkellä oli ja puhui Suomen suurin puhuja, Fredrik Cygnaeus eikä kukaan muu. Ja samalla tavalla tunsimme omaksemme myöskin Lönnrotin ja Castrenin, jotka molemmat vilahtivat filmissä ohitsemme. (“Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu”, *Ylioppilaslehti*)

[We hear how Runeberg himself recites his Döbeln<sup>6</sup> and we really feel and sense him as Runeberg. We see Fredrik Cygnaeus step onto the rostrum at the Flora feast, we hear him talk and then we really know that he is and speaks like the greatest orator in Finland, Fredrik Cygnaeus, and no one else. And in the same way we recognise Lönnrot and Castren, who appeared briefly in the film.]

The author *Erve*, finally, acknowledges in the provincial newspaper *Aamulehti* that

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<sup>6</sup>Döbeln here refers to the famous poem written by Runeberg.

Elokuva vie katsojan tosiaankin runebergilaisiin viime vuosisadan vuosikymmeneihin; siinä tuskin on ainoatakaan kohtaa, joka tässä suhteessa pettäisi. Pienimpiin yksityiskohtiin ulottuvalla tarkkuudella on saavutettu oikeansävyinen kokonaiskuva. (“Kaksi mainiota kotimaista elokuvaa”, *Aamulehti*)

[Indeed, the film takes the spectator to the Runebergian decades of the last century; there is not a moment which fails. They have achieved an entity of sufficient precision and tone that the minutest details have been taken into account.]

The experiences of contemporary spectators can be explained by Tom Gunning’s concept of attraction. According to Gunning the enjoyment of early cinema was based on “the aesthetic of attractions” (“An Aesthetic” 121). Early films did not offer pleasure by engaging a spectator with narration or psychological characterisation; rather, they entertained people by showing astonishing moving pictures. The first biographical films in Finland differ from the early cinema studied by Gunning as they evidently are narrative films. However, as Gunning himself mentions, the cinema of attractions has not disappeared but still exists in avant-garde cinema or in certain elements of narrative film (“The Cinema” 382, 386). I am suggesting that a culturally verisimilar representation of the well-known past, especially of a famous person, could be such an element of attraction.

In the case of biographical film, the concept of attraction refers not to the historical period of cinema, but to the mode of representation and a specific appeal to spectators (Gunning, “Attractions” 36, 37; Kessler 57–58). Moreover, it accounts for the specific pleasurable cinematic experience a biographical film may afford. The supposedly authentic moment or figure of the past is presented to a spectator (see Strauven, “Introduction” 15). As Gunning has noted (“An Aesthetic” 121), it is not a question of catering for a naïve spectator who could not distinguish fiction from the real world. The spectator is aware of the act of looking and recognises the reference to the historical past, knows it is an illusion, but takes pleasure in the exciting verisimilitude of the presentation. Thus, the special enjoyment a biographical film provides is a cinematic trick of sorts: the past is astonishingly enlivened. We are able to see and hear the person as if alive before us.

### **The Pleasures of Play**

Promises and expectations of verisimilitude, reactions to the portrayals, repeated comparisons between the real world and representations, these reciprocal practices could be interpreted as a game. Philip Rosen (155–57) has called this game Everett’s Game (also the Knowing Game). He argues that Hollywood studios with their research departments challenged the audience to a game where everyone’s knowledge about the details of a film was measured. The studios claimed that the film was an accurate depiction of a topic and the audience was expected to react if they detected any failure of verisimilitude. According to Rosen, the Knowing Game especially concerned historical mainstream films, although any film laying claim to truth could be an object of the game. Rosen has pointed out that this is

a pleasing game, where spectators win in any event, either by gaining new knowledge from a film or by demonstrating their superiority to a film (Rosen 156–57). Rosen has explained the claim in detail as “the desire to see actuality through the moving indexical image” (166).<sup>7</sup> Although this is an interesting account of the game, the case of *Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu* indicates that indexicality was not an issue. Although the contemporary audience appreciated authenticity, such as authentic props, it was resemblance that they wanted. Thus, cultural verisimilitude in the film was based on iconicity (Lehtisalo 350–53). However, the idea of the Knowing Game also seems applicable in the Finnish context. The reviewers participated in the game by estimating the verisimilitude of the film or by pointing out factual errors. Indeed, the idea was to demonstrate one’s superiority through attention to detail, not to review the whole film, for a reviewer might comment on misrepresentations, despite a laudatory review.

The resemblance of Runeberg was evaluated, for example, regardless of what the reviewer thought about the acting: “Eino Kaipainen’s Runeberg was probably mentally and physically more heavily built than the poet himself, but he performs his part with such warmth and credibility that we like his Runeberg,” [“Eino Kaipaisen Runeberg on mahdollisesti sielulliselta ja ruumilliselta asennoitumiseltaan raskaampaa tekoa kuin runoilija itse on ollut, mutta hän esittää osansa sellaisella lämmöllä ja siksi vakuuttavasti, että me pidämme hänen Runebergistaan”] explained the author *T. A.* in the left-wing newspaper *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* (“Kotimaisia ensi-iltoja”, *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti*). “Eino Kaipainen’s Runeberg probably does not resemble the image we have of the great poet, but his presence and the interpretation of his mindset are quite close to reality,” [Eino Kaipaisen Runebergin ulkonäkö ei ehkä vastaa sitä mielikuvaa, jonka olemme suuresta runoilijasta saaneet, mutta olemukseltaan ja sielunelämän tulkinnaallaan hän pääsee melko lähelle todellisuutta”] thought the author *J—n* in the local newspaper *Savo* (“Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu”, *Savo*). After commenting on misrepresentations, a reviewer might concede that film-makers have artistic freedom to shape the life story if the basic idea is not distorted (see, e.g., “Skaldekoningen och flyttfågeln”, *Hufvudstadsbladet*). The reviews of *Runon kuningas ja muuttolintu* were typically remarks of admiration on how “authentic”, “true to life” and “epochal” the *mise en scène* of the film was (Lehtisalo 314–15).

The Knowing Game reworked and exploited contemporary conceptions of the past. On the one hand, it was indeed an entertaining game. The fictional film permitted fictionalisation and the game was played over the details. The game marked the commentator out as an enlightened reviewer or as a sophisticated spectator. The pleasure of such superiority might be called *plaisir*, after Roland Barthes, *plaisir* referring to consciously controlled enjoyment in contrast to *jouissance*, which denotes uncontrolled bodily pleasures (23, 69). On the other hand, the benign game might turn into a serious negotiation of the collective past if the details concern the national past and common values. At issue would no longer be the spectator’s

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<sup>7</sup>Rosen’s argument is based on André Bazin’s ideas of film realism (see, e.g., 11–14, 166–74).

competence in history, but a power struggle over definitions of the collective past (see, e.g., Hall 292–95). Nonetheless, *Runon kuningas ja muutolintu* avoided serious disputes by adhering to cultural verisimilitude and the patriotic sentiments appropriate to its contemporary circumstances.

By the 1950s, Finnish biographical films had turned away from performances of historical figures and the depictions of historical events. This might be an indication of genre development: it was no longer necessary to emphasise these generic features in a biopic, because the audience was already familiar with the genre. Film-makers might also have assumed that culturally verisimilar elements had lost their audience appeal and the audience would expect other pleasurable features. However, it is evident that the Knowing Game continues on even now. In the Finnish context, there has been a new boom in biographical films and television series at the turn of the millennium. It seems that depictions of the past still inspire spectators to comment on plausibility and accuracy. New technology has also created new options. Nowadays, private spectators have more opportunities to take part in the game on the Internet.

Moreover, recent developments in biographical film suggest that the element of attraction might still live on. If one considers films like *The Queen* (2009) or *The King's Speech* (2010), where the narration culminates in the historical public acts of the protagonists, the moment of attraction is salient, but has altered its essence. No longer does the verisimilar appearance alone create the affective experience, but rather the sense of 'authentic' intimacy between spectators and a public figure at a well-known public event. These attractions might be one explanation for the on-going success of the biographical genre.

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