



ANU KOIVUNEN

# Performative Histories, Foundational Fictions

*Gender and Sexuality in Niskavuori Films*

Studia Fennica  
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Studia Fennica Historica 7

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Anu Koivunen

# Introduction: Performative Framings, Foundational Fictions

## *Prologue: from Niskavuori to Tara*

*“[Hella] Wuolijoki’s important position in Finnish drama stems from the series of five plays about the Niskavuori estate and its passionate owners. The story of the women born out of the earth of Tavastlandia in [Central] Finland has its background partly in reality, in the history of the family at the Wuolijoki estate in Sahalahti, Finland. As drama, the Niskavuori epic represents the essence of the Finnish rural melodrama. The core of the story deals with a conflict between the fulfilment of duties and giving way for love. The story-line is built upon several generations of strong women who carry on their shoulders the responsibility of the estate, its people and its traditions while their men are absent.*

*This [setup] goes against the grain of the mainstream melodrama in which the female character in the first place is seen and not heard. No matter whether the Niskavuori men are in the city escaping from their responsibilities or in public service, they always seem to be consumed by a craving for the unattainable. The women, in (...) turn, stay at home, immutably rooted in the earth, and lace up their corsets in order to face the day, and control their emotions, which can only be traced in the scant retorts and the skilful mimicry of the actresses.”<sup>1</sup>*

With these eloquent words, *Nordic National Cinemas* (1998) introduces the series of seven Niskavuori films (1938–1984) to an international readership. The quoted paragraphs – and the mere presence of these films in this particular context of packaging national cinemas into comparable products – suggest that the films in question enjoy a special status in their country of origin. What is more, the book’s description summarizes what in the Finnish context can be termed as the common sense of the Niskavuori films, pulling together several threads of their long-standing and continuing reception. *First*, the quote frames the films as anchored “in reality” as it connects them with the biography of the female playwright Hella Wuolijoki on whose five plays

1 Soila 1998, 62.

(1936–1953) the films are based.<sup>2</sup> Wuolijoki’s persona, her family history, and political activism have always loomed large in public discourses around Niskavuori plays and films. In this quote, the biography is linked to a specific place and region, Häme (Tavastlandia), which is both the region where Hella Wuolijoki had relatives through her marriage, the narrative landscape of the Niskavuori family, and in the nationalist imaginings, a privileged locus of Finnishness since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Second*, the quote frames the Niskavuori films in terms of gender history, anchoring them firmly in a woman-centred and feminist point of view. In implying a parallel between the fictional world and the history of Finnish women, it reiterates another common narrative offered since the 1930s, women shouldering the household burden while men worked (in forestry, on the railroad and in log floating companies) or waged wars. An emphasis on the distinctive “power” and “strength” of Finnish women is an inherent feature of this reading. The source of this narrative – and, by implication, also the origin of a specific gender discourse featuring “strong women” and “weak men” – is located within a past, pre-modern, agrarian world. *Third*, the quote employs mythological language and folkloric notions of genesis in characterizing the Niskavuori women as “born out of the earth of Tavastlandia” or as “rooted in the earth”. Through these expressions, the quote enacts a reading of the films and characters as place- and soil-bound; it suggests that the representations be seen as more “authentic” or “essential”, as less mediated or fabricated than some other representations. In addition, this reading evokes a folkloric narration. It establishes links to national mythology (the *Kalevala* as the Finnish “national epic”) and, hence, implies that the story of the Niskavuori family not only retrieves the linear time of history, but also a mythical timelessness of repetition and monumentality. Indeed, the matrons of the Niskavuori farm are recurrently termed “monumental” and described through metaphors of trees and stones. *Fourth*, the quote places the Niskavuori films within the framework of melodrama and, thus, reiterates earlier readings of the Niskavuori saga in terms of affective impact, as well as recent readings of Niskavuori in terms of soap opera narration. Interestingly, there is no contradiction between the “realist” content (Niskavuori as history) and the melodramatic narration. In this reading, on the contrary, the melodramatic mode, i.e., the manner in which strong emotions are concealed yet visible as traces in camera movements (“scant retorts”) or “skilful mimicry” [sic] appears as an essential counterpart to the history as it is articulated in Niskavuori films. Indeed, the melodramatic mode is a key element in this image of a Finnish mentality. *Fifth* and lastly, as the quote does not differentiate between the Niskavuori plays and Niskavuori films, but speaks of them as one, the films are framed as inherently intertextual or, rather, *intermedial*. In this respect, the quote also reiterates earlier readings: promotional publicity around films has referred to theatre productions, and theatre reviews have commented on films. For

2 In this book, I subsequently spell “Wuolijoki” following Hella Wuolijoki’s own usage. In my sources, however both “Wuolijoki” and “Vuolijoki” appear, and when quoting, I follow the original.

almost 70 years, the story of the Niskavuori family has been “everywhere” in Finnish culture: in 168 productions in professional theatres, in thousands of performances, in innumerable amateur productions in summer theatres or theatre clubs, in seven feature film adaptations, in forty screenings on TV, in seventeen radio plays, in three television dramas, and even in a ballet. As a result, it has become virtually impossible to differentiate between copies and originals or to single out *one* text. In every singular production or reading, numerous others have been present.

The above cited quote, like any other discussion of the films, cites, repeats, and re-assembles an array of previous readings of the Niskavuori saga, which have been articulated, established, and recycled in countless advertisement slogans, promotional texts, stills, posters, trailers, film reviews, and scholarly commentaries since the 1930s. Over the past decades, these framings have, to varying degrees, emphasized a reality-effect (*vraisemblance*), cultural and national imaginary (“Finnish mentality”), regionalism (Häme), folkloric elements (connections to national mythology), melodramatic narration (desires, passions, repression), and the playwright and her biography (family history, political activism) as key interpretive matrices that account for the Niskavuori saga and explain its continuing popularity. In its final sentence, the book quote performs yet another important interpretive move; it refers to *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), one of the most famous Hollywood melodramas ever, and quite specifically to the well-known scene where the black Mammy (Hattie McDaniel) is dressing Scarlet O’Hara (Vivien Leigh). This intertextual reference is intriguing in many senses. It illustrates a pleasure taken in the films in question: it suggests that viewing Niskavuori films provides enjoyment comparable to that experienced when watching *Gone with the Wind*. In addition, it associates Niskavuori films with women’s popular pleasures, implying that women, in particular, might enjoy the films. The reference is particularly interesting also because it, in fact, is an incorrect figure of speech, a *slip*; In Niskavuori, unlike in Tara, neither the waistline nor the underwear of the matrons is ever an issue – in the films, neither Loviisa nor Heta Niskavuori are ever shown to “lace up their corsets”. They do tie up their aprons, but corsets they lace up only in the minds of audiences, the intertextually knowledgeable and imaginative spectators.

This kind of imaginary re-membling of images, this linking and layering of two separate texts, exhibited in the quote is, however, nothing exceptional in the history of the reception of the Niskavuori saga. Instead, it is a vital component of all reading and viewing as an activity of framing. Evoking intertextual frameworks (folklore, media, genre, and iconography) and anchoring films or images at specific discursive fields (gender, sexuality, nation, and history) are key mechanisms of this performative process, which can be termed interpretive framing. In this process, films are given significance in relation to other texts and in terms of cultural discourses. *Through* and *with* the legacies of these different interpretive framings, Niskavuori films are given meanings, watched, and talked about. And through the interpretive framings, Niskavuori films have become constituents of “the cultural screen” (Silverman 1996) and achieved the status of “public

fantasies” (de Lauretis 1999). Moreover, through the interpretive work, through reiterated readings, “Niskavuori” has become a sign that, in the cultural imaginary, articulates notions of history, nation, and gender. Like the frame around a painting or the edges of a book, the interpretive framings are not something external to the films – a coil or a coating to be removed in order to uncover “the film itself” – but constitutive of them as cultural artefacts.

### *Public fantasies across the cultural screen: questions and aims*

“It seems to me crucial that we insist upon the ideological status of the screen by describing it as that culturally generated image or repertoire of images through which subjects are not only constituted but differentiated in relation to class, race, sexuality, age, and nationality”  
Kaja Silverman 1992, 150.

“Popular culture forms have the effect of something *deeply felt and experienced*, and yet they are *fictional* representations. (...) The narratives inscribed in popular forms and their scenarios or *mise-en-scène*, complete with characters, passions, conflicts, and resolutions, may be considered *public fantasies*.”  
Teresa de Lauretis 1999, 304.

How do films, images, and narratives become coordinates for thinking about nation, gender, and history? How does a film, an image or a narrative become incorporated in what Kaja Silverman (1992, 1996) has termed “the cultural screen” or “the cultural image-repertoire”, the realm of representations that enables and constraints how we perceive ourselves and others, how we read images and narratives and what passes for “reality” in any particular context? How does a film or a group of films operate as public fantasies, moving and affecting its viewers and functioning as a social technology and a discursive apparatus, to quote Teresa de Lauretis (1984, 1999)? In this book, I investigate these questions through a particular case of Finnish cinema: the seven Niskavuori feature films released between 1938 and 1984. The films include the two versions of *The Women of Niskavuori* (*Niskavuoren naiset* 1938 and 1958, dir. Valentin Vaala), *Loviisa* (*Loviisa* 1946, dir. Edvin Laine), *Heta Niskavuori* (*Niskavuoren Heta* 1952, dir. Edvin Laine), *Aarne Niskavuori* (*Niskavuoren Aarne* 1954, dir. Edvin Laine), *Niskavuori Fights* (*Niskavuori taistelee* 1957, dir. Edvin Laine), and *Niskavuori* (1984, dir. Matti Kassila). While the imaginary realm of “Niskavuori” is an intermedial construction, if anything, my focus in this book is on the films, and more specifically, their interpretive framings. Instead of reading the films as objects of textual or narrative analysis, I trace their “diachronic life” and their “post-origin appearances” (Klinger 1997) and attempt to take seriously the notion of film reception *in time*. Hence, I explore the historicity as well as the intertextuality and intermediality of meaning-making: the ways in which the films have been read and framed for further readings in contexts of cinema, television, theatre, and radio; in and through promotional publicity (posters, ads, lobby cards, publicity-

stills, trailers, features), review journalism, and critical commentary. In this respect, the two key concepts in this study are framing (Klinger 1994; see Derrida 1987; Culler 1983, 1988; Bal 1991; 1999) and performativity (Butler 1990a, 1993, 1997; Bhabha 1991; 1994a; Bell 1999), which both refer to the formation of cultural meaning not as a textually determined finality, but as a contingent process. Operating with these concepts as my analytical tools, I scrutinize the processes of citation, repetition, and recycling, which have sedimented the interpretive repertoires and matrices through which “Niskavuori” has become an apparently self-evident, stable, and quotable sign and vehicle for articulating meanings of gender, nation, and history.<sup>3</sup> In my reading, I not only trace the stability, continuity and sameness characterizing the cultural screen or the public fantasies, but also the instabilities, differences, contradictions and exclusions inherent in them (cf. Butler 1992; Silverman 1996). As in my previous work (Koivunen 1995), I approach cinema as inherently dialogical (Bakhtin 1981). Hence, my approach is informed by Richard Dyer’s (1993, 2) astute guidelines for analyzing the “matter of images”: “what is re-presented in representation is not directly reality itself but other representations”, he writes and continues: “The analysis of images always needs to see how any given instance is embedded in a network of other instances”. In my understanding, to explore what Dyer (*ibid.*, 3) calls “the complex, shifting business of re-presenting, reworking, recombining representations”, is to investigate the dynamics of the cultural screen or the public fantasies.<sup>4</sup>

In exploring the cultural screen as a national imaginary, as a projection of “Finnish gender”, “Finnishness”, and “our history”, I find Judith Butler’s (1990a, 1993, 1997) account of performativity a compelling analytical framework.<sup>5</sup> In my understanding, Butler’s notion of performativity as historicity enables a critical investigation of the “given-to-be-seen” (Silverman 1996, 122). With this notion, I refer to what seems to contain any reading of “Niskavuori”: that which “goes-without-saying”, the common sense form of nationalism-as-narrative (Landy 1996, 19; Layoun 1992, 411; Keränen 1998, 152ff), the massive repetition that characterizes the Niskavuori phenomenon and its habitual rhetoric of familiarity.<sup>6</sup> As “narrating the nation”

3 Cf. O’Regan 1996, 6, 145ff. Tom O’Regan has studied “Australian national cinema” in terms of socially meaningful “interpretative protocols”, intertexts, and contexts which operate in the meaning-making processes. He has identified “repertoires” which, over time, have become “self-evident, and are un-reflexive, interpretative and creative norms” (*ibid.*, 160–163).

4 One must mention, however, that Richard Dyer’s approach lacks the psychoanalytic framework which informs both the notion of cultural screen (in Kaja Silverman’s Lacanian reading) and the notion of public fantasy (in Teresa de Lauretis’s joining of Gramsci and Freud). The emphasis on the mattering of representations is, nevertheless, a common denominator for all approaches.

5 Here I follow Tuija Pulkkinen (1993; 1996) who has suggested that nationality, like gender, can be conceptualized in terms of performatively constituted identities that enact and effect what they claim to express or be founded on. See also, for instance, Sneja Gunew (1996, 168–169) and Anne-Marie Fortier (2000, 5–6) who have investigated how ethnicity is constructed performatively.

6 Cf. Marcia Landy’s (1996) argument on the melodramatic pleasures of repetition.

(Bhabha 1990; 1994a) does not involve one, but many stories, the lure for the investigator is to start *explaining* one story with another according to what might be called the hermeneutics of the nation. In this approach, the nation – be it imagined, invented, narrated, or not – is never at stake. On the contrary, the interiority of what counts as national or Finnish is over and again confirmed (Koivunen 1998). To avoid this lure, this sense of an overwhelming and self-explaining familiarity of the context, I take the massive repetition itself as my object of study and pose genealogical questions in a “Butlerian spirit”, starting from the present, from the existing readings and framings and tracing their historical legacies. Even writing in a foreign language is a part of this project of “defamiliarization”. In the case of the Niskavuori films, the question is not *whether* the films are *about* history, nation, or gender. On the contrary, these meanings are overt and explicit, attached to the Niskavuori saga in public framings since the 1930s. Instead, then, the question here concerns the repetition and its historicity, its contexts and dynamics. In my approach, I want to underscore dissonances and that which has been left unnoticed or concealed and, hence, to question that which appears as *mere* repetition, continuity, and sameness.

In a genealogical move, then, this book aims to show that what the films through their framings posit as the *basis* of representation – and, thus, as the origin of gender and nationality, i.e., the time and space of the nation – is, an *effect* of their representation (Butler 1993, 2). At the same time, this book draws attention to the fragility of that “basis” by uncovering “historicality” as an effect of repetition in time, by tracing the divergent meanings and by locating the unfamiliar and disturbing in the assumed familiarity. As Giuliana Bruno (1984, 50) has argued, “according to Nietzschean genealogy, what is found at an historical beginning is not origin but dissension or disparity. And questioning origin in light of genealogy is to open historical work to dissension, disparity, and contradiction.”<sup>7</sup> While problematizing the notions of identity, home, and belonging, this approach takes all these concepts very seriously. The *force* of performativity is at issue here.<sup>8</sup> Even if the emphasis is on texts and the mode of analysis is deconstructive in spirit, my focus is on the oft-articulated and “deeply-felt” force, persistence, and compelling nature of the Niskavuori narrative. (Cf. de Lauretis 1999, 307; Landy 1996, 19.) As Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger write in their introduction to *Nationalisms & Sexualities* (1992), to suggest that a nation is “imaginary” does not “consign it to the category of (mere) fiction”.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, as Parker and the others state, “if it is a ‘dream’ it is one possessing all the institutional force and affect of the real.” (Parker et al. 1992, 11–12.) Hence, a question addressed indirectly in this study

7 Bruno is, here, quoting Foucault (1977, 142) who in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” argues: “What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity.”

8 On the Nietzschean and Foucauldian roots of the concept of force, see Butler 1987/1999, 180–183.

9 In fact, Benedict Anderson (1991, 6–7) develops his concept of “imaginary communities” in his critique of Ernst Gellner who draws a distinction between “true” and “false” nations.

Films are essential to national imagination and promotional publicity markets “domestic films” not only as entertaining, exciting, or moving, but also as topical and relevant in different ways. When assessing new films, reviewers make reference to other films and cultural products as well as social and political issues. Through such interpretive framings by contemporary and later generations, popular cinema is embedded in both national imagination and endless intertextual and intermedial frameworks. Moreover, films themselves become symbols which are cited and recycled as illustrations of cultural, social, and political history as well as national mentality.

In *Performative Histories, Foundational Fictions*, Anu Koivunen analyzes the historicity as well as the intertextuality and intermediality of film reception as she focuses on a cycle of Finnish family melodrama and its key role in thinking about gender, sexuality, nation, and history. Close-reading posters, advertisements, publicity-stills, trailers, review journalism, and critical commentary, she demonstrates how *The Women of Niskavuori* (1938 and 1958), *Loviisa* (1946), *Heta Niskavuori* (1952), *Aarne Niskavuori* (1954), *Niskavuori Fights* (1957), and *Niskavuori* (1984) have served as sites for imagining “our agrarian past”, our Heimat and heritage as well as “the strong Finnish woman” or “the weak man in crisis”. Based on extensive empirical research, Koivunen argues that the Niskavuori films have inspired readings in terms of history and memory, feminist nationalism and men’s movement, left-wing allegories and right-wing morality as well as realism and melodrama. Through processes of citation, repetition, and re-cycling the films have acquired not only a heterogeneous and contradictory interpretive legacy, but also significant affective force.



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