

## Summary

# ORIGINS OF PREVENTIVE FILM CONTROL IN FINLAND

## Spreading of the Cinema in Finland

Commercial cinema shows, which had started to spread from France towards the end of 1895, arrived in Finland as early as six months later. The first films were run publicly in Helsinki in late June 1896, and the cinema got a positive and enthusiastic reception. However, it was not yet understood how controversial that reception would later be.

The first films were very short and characterised by an instructive tone. They presented geographic places and current events. The attitude towards these films was favourable, and the occasional entertaining, expressly amusing bits were also generally accepted. The cinema got a positive reception in every part of the world, and vast crowds of people swarmed to showings to see this great novelty. However, the first attraction of the cinema soon faded away and the public lost interest. The cinema business had to come up with something new to maintain its audiences, and hence, its own means of livelihood. The development of the cinema started towards 1904–1905. The films became more and more drama-like, with increasing action. The new cinema did, indeed, become very popular and the audiences returned to the cinema theatres.

The increase in demand through the new type of cinema was so great that the producers were forced to develop their distribution; it was mandatory that people saw the new films as soon as possible. More attention was also paid to the conditions in which the films were shown so that the audience could enjoy the new films in maximum comfort. Permanent cinema theatres were established in urban areas, which meant an end to the phenomenon of touring cinemas.

Through the increased drama content of the cinema, the film topics became somewhat closer to the everyday life of the people, the bourgeoisie in particular. The common people now had a chance to see things which they had never seen before. But the bourgeoisie was not necessarily very happy about its life being spread all over the screen in front of everyone's eyes.

As a consequence of changing film content and developing theatres, cinema attracted more and more attention and, at the same time, various circles of society started to take an increasingly reserved stand towards the cinema. It was no longer just harmless a pastime and entertainment.

In the debate on the status of the cinema, in fact, voices were fairly soon raised, demanding restrictions to be imposed on public cinema shows. It was

thought that films contained certain things presented in such a manner that made it questionable as to whether all films should be run. A general restriction on the cinema was also called for. The early stages of Finnish preventive film inspection covered a fairly long period of time. The various interested parties could soon agree on objectives and methods but the implementation took about ten years, and still the result did not quite meet the expectations. This study focuses on the events and reasons behind the demands for Finnish preventive film inspection, which was eventually established.

## Purpose of the Study

It seems that the debate on preventive film control started after certain changes had taken place in the content, distribution and showing conditions of the films. But is the issue as simple as that? What is the relationship of the cinema to the surrounding society and people? Instead of merely focusing on the cinema and the history of the cinema culture, the premise of my study is more comprehensive. I am interested in the cultural history of cinema, and therefore the study must also comprise the changes and developments that have taken place in Finnish society. These variables will all come together in the debate regarding the preventive control of films before their public showing. This study tries to answer the question why it was necessary to control the films in advance. It is, of course, possible and necessary to start the discussion from the actual films: did something happen in the films that made the attitudes towards the cinema repertoire change? Or were the real reasons elsewhere? Was the real variable something other than just the repertoire? Was the debate on cinema and the request for preventive control a part of a more comprehensive societal debate, and if so, how did the focus and objectives of this debate change?

At this point, it is advisable to look at the two concepts “the history of cinema culture” and “the cultural history of cinema”.

## Cultural History of Cinema

James Monaco has classified the cinema in three categories: movie, cinema and film. Among Finnish scholars, Hannu Salmi has used the same classification to develop and elaborate on the research in cinema, and the concepts can also be used to analyse cinema research in general.

“Movies” can be specified to refer to commercial cinema only, the principal purpose of which is entertainment. “Cinema” refers to so-called artistic cinema, i.e., films which are venerated as artistic masterpieces in this field. Here we refer to cinema as an “aesthetic institution”. These films have been studied mainly on the basis of their content as well as in terms of film-making. Hannu Salmi refers to this type of research as “research in the history of cinema culture”. This is the most popular line of cinema research, not only internationally but also

nationally. Within this area of research and writing, the most common form includes the various global cinema histories which mainly focus on the films as cinematographic works, as well as on factors that have contributed to their creation. The research in cinema culture has mostly been practised by cinema researchers, not by historians.

The third concept, “film”, is the most comprehensive one, also including the relationship between the cinema and the society. According to Hannu Salmi, this line of research focuses on the cultural history of cinema.

Research in the cultural history of cinema is interested in the destiny of the film once it has been shot and shown. The research must look into and account for the reception of the film, i.e., the reactions of the audience and society. The reception may be dependent on the structure of the public, on current societal problems or ideological movements.

In accordance with this approach, films are not created or do not exist in a vacuum but are a part of a more comprehensive societal development. Therefore, we must look at the society of the turn of the century: what were the changes taking place, and what was their eventual impact on the early stages of preventive film control? Were recent changes and events in society looking for an outlet, and were the films and the cinema shows chosen or did they become the channel for that pressure? As is so often the case in history, the answer to these questions will not be unambiguous but is to be found both in the films themselves and in the societal changes.

The study will also focus on the question of how the early stages of Finnish preventive film control were connected to the development in other countries. Comparisons are mainly made with the corresponding development in Sweden and Norway, as well as in Germany and Britain. The study will also try to answer the question of whether the Finnish development differed from that in other countries.

The research period starts at the turn of the 20th century, the period in which, on the one hand, cinema started to spread in Finland and, on the other hand, the changes in the Finnish society of the estates started to accelerate. It is far more difficult to set the other limit for the research period. The preventive film control practice, in force until 1946, was created as early as 1919. But that did not mark the end of the cinema debate that had started over a decade earlier. The 1919 control practice was under revision, and the first stage of the film control debate did not end until late 1922 with Parliament’s dismissal of the Government bill for a cinema act. The roots of that act can be traced back to the spring of 1908, and therefore the autumn of 1922 constitutes a logical end to this debate.

## The Dimensions of the Study

The study has two principal dimensions: the films and the development and changes of Finnish society. Moreover, the history of preventive film control, or

film previews, must be studied from the point of view of pure censorship. These concepts need to be specified.

### *1) The Cinema Industry*

The cinema industry can be analysed in terms of various operators: the cinemas which showed them, the distributors and the film-makers.

In the debate over cinema, until the early 1920s the cinema industry was mainly represented by the cinema theatre owners. Prior to the '20s, they were also the principal distributors; the companies focusing on distribution had started to operate only in the 1910s but they did not yet play any particular role. The theatre owners mainly decided what films would be run in their theatres, which was another manner of participating in the debate.

In 1907, the number of theatres was still quite modest but as cinema became more popular, new theatres started to be established in Finland. Although audiences were big, the competition among cinemas became increasingly tough.

To what extent was the tougher competition within the cinema business reflected in their repertoire of films, and in the marketing and the running of the films? As a rule, the cinema was evaluated and criticised on the basis of the films that had been seen. But that was not the whole truth as far as the cinema debate was concerned, since many persons who participated in the debate had never been to a cinema. Their opinions were based on newspaper adverts and billboards, as well as on other people's opinions. The impressions were also conditioned by the crowds outside the cinemas, the people queuing to see a film. It was probably assumed that all persons circulating around and about the theatres would actually go to the cinema. This assumption mainly applied to children and the young.

In the debate over preventive film control, newspaper advertising thus played a central role. The posters in cinema lobbies and walls, as well as the eventual billboards advertising cinema were at least equally important. The new cinema theatres that had been established in urban areas, especially in downtown Helsinki, reflected the status, quantity and quality of cinema in the minds of those participating in the cinema debate. The images and impressions of cinema were created through the theatres and the ensuing advertising. From 1907 on, the changes in cinema itself – both the quantitative and the qualitative changes – made it an increasingly important part of the Finnish society.

The film-makers participated in the debate through their productions. However, these productions were very modest in Finland, although short films had been made from 1904, and the first drama film was completed as early as 1907. Domestic production remained modest until the early 1920s, and therefore it did not play any major role in the cinema debate of the years between 1908 and 1922.

## 2) *The Finnish Society*

In late 19th and early 20th century, Finnish society was dominated by three factors which were based on liberal ideas. However, liberalism was no longer a homogenous ideology but was by the early 20th century divided into three currents which differed greatly from each other. The ideology of economic liberalism, based on the freedom of the individual, had changed, and social liberalism prioritised the welfare of all citizens over the complete freedom of the individual. In turn, cultural liberalism had changed over two decades, and by the early 20th century it had become very conservative, so much so that new liberal ideas were overcoming traditional cultural liberalism.

Owing to the general ideas of economic liberalism, the Finnish economy started to liberalise through the freedom of trade instituted towards the end of the 1860s. As a consequence of the liberalisation, people's mobility also increased and they started to look for work in cities and population centres. The late 19th century saw the creation of new urban labour neighbourhoods which had a substantial impact on the cityscape and population structures. As the population increased, the number and status of children also changed. Towards the late 19th century, Finland had started to change from an agrarian society into an urban society at a pace that was slow but consistent.

The ideas of cultural liberalism spread in Finland in the early 1880s mainly through literature and drama. According to the new ideas, the same morality requirement should apply to both men and women, which in practice meant that men had to raise themselves to the women's level of morals.

The cultural liberal ideas laid foundations for social liberal ideas. According to the new way of thinking, complete individual freedom could not be the ultimate objective but society should take care of its less favoured members so that all citizens enjoyed satisfactory living conditions. In practice, this meant that attention was paid to the disadvantaged members of society. As a result of the social liberal ideas, a new kind of social welfare system started to emerge, with a special focus on children and the young.

The social liberal ideas, which did not emerge until the 1890s, won supporters mainly among missionary priests and moral-Christian associations. During the early 20th century, the ideas also started to spread among the civil servant class.

In the morality debate that had started in the late 19th century, the focal theme was double morals, but increasing attention was also paid to other issues which were seen to threaten morality. On the one hand, the current circumstances were lamented, on the other hand the debate was starting to pay attention to existing problems and their causes. The morality debate was also a part of a more extensive debate related to the formulation of the Finnish society. The objective was to contribute to Finland becoming a morally strong and sustainable society, a strong nation state. The other basic pillars of society were the Finnish national identity, bourgeois values and mentally and physically healthy citizens.

But although morality was understood in a wide sense, the morality debate, which had started in the late 19th century, was mainly concerned with sexuality and sex, and the appearance and presentation of sexuality in public.

### *3) Censorship*

The concept of advance inspection is easily associated with censorship, and therefore the history of preventive film control is also a history of cinema censorship. Preventive film control and censorship share a basic objective: the maintaining of power. The main aim of censorship has been to maintain political power and the existing social order.

Censorship can be classified as advance censorship and post-publication censorship. In the first case, the censoring, the limitation of presentation, takes place before the publication of the product – here the film – while the post-publication censorship measures take place when the film is already in distribution.

However, I would make a distinction between censorship – be it advance or post-publication censorship – and preventive control. Censorship refers to practical measures to inspect the film and, if necessary, to censor it in a manner to prohibit its showing either in part or in full. The censorship authority is the party that will cut the film in accordance with established general instructions, which, however, are given by some other authority or body. The instructions are either based on legislation or administrative decisions, or the censorship practice otherwise agreed upon. The latter case is probably fairly rare. To summarise, the censorship instructions come from a party outside the censorship authority.

In this study, preventive film control refers to the development and the reasons which form the basis for censorship instructions and also the regulations concerning the censorship authority. Thus the concept of preventive film control is more extensive than that of censorship.

In practice, the research in film censorship involves the study of censored films and the individual prohibition motives. This study is not about film censorship since I am not focusing on the reasons for prohibiting any particular film.

## On Source Material

The source material regarding the actual debate on cinema is mainly held by individual ideological associations. The newspaper also followed the debate to a certain extent during the end of the first decade of the 20th century, but mostly starting from the 1910s. Towards the middle of that decade, following the strengthening of the societal current within the Church, the newspaper “Kotimaa”, close to the Church, also started to express its stand regarding films. In illustrating the contemporary debate, this newspaper is an extremely important source.

The archives of the Senate and various ministries (Government agencies) contain not only the documents related to the cinema debate but also the decisions taken by the authorities. Starting from the 1920s, the source material, including the documents on committee work and the archives of Parliament, is quite abundant.

Much has been written about the history of cinema culture, and there is plenty of information about the development of the cinema and about various films. The research in early cinema, an essential field as far as research is concerned, assumed new dimensions after a conference held in Brighton in 1979. In fact, after Brighton the researchers started to study the early cinema in a more systematic manner, and the views on that period have changed somewhat. However, new research has not shed any new light on the history of preventive film control in the various countries.

Starting from 1911, it is possible to have a picture of the films distributed in Finland. Along with the preventive control, the bookkeeping on inspected films started in Helsinki from that year. However, the information is quite scarce since the register only contained the name of the film, either in Finnish or in Swedish, the importer company, the length of the film as well as the classification given by the inspectors. The film was mainly recorded as a comedy, drama, current event or nature film. We have no way of knowing whether the classification corresponded to the actual content of the films.

## THE EMERGENCE OF PREVENTIVE FILM CONTROL IN FINLAND UNTIL THE EARLY 1920s

Beginning in the autumn of 1907, the cinema was felt to be so dangerous, especially as far as children and the young were concerned, that the showing of films had to be restricted in advance. These demands were made mostly by the circles concerned with the status of children, mainly the child welfare authorities and Church-related associations. Child welfare was based on new social liberal ideas, and the Church associations were mainly concerned with the moral welfare of the citizens but were also fulfilling the traditional educational and welfare tasks associated with the Church.

The roots of the cinema debate are, however, much deeper and can be found in the morality debate that had started in the 1880s. Based on cultural liberalism, a debate had started on the equality of men and women, as well as on the nation's prevailing double-standard morals. The debate got a new, deeper dimension at the very beginning of the 20th century when the conservatives, who had had to take a defensive stand, started to practice a new kind of morality education with the aim of out-rooting the factors that caused immorality among citizens.

Why did this debate start precisely in 1907–1908? The underlying factors can be found among the changes that had taken place in the spiritual and mental state of Finland. Beginning from the end of the preceding century, society was

in a state of transformation, and this change eventually led to the rupture of the society of estates. The process was not slow but it progressed through several different stages and took many different forms. The debate over the cinema and the respective demands were a part of this process. From the research point of view, the process was first dominated by morality, then by juvenile delinquency and finally by economic factors. The latter factor shows that it was a question of transition towards a new society in which a certain idealistic character and morality of the 19th century was slowly fading away.

The cinema debate was a direct continuation of the debate on immoral literature and images that had already started. Fairly soon, i.e., as of the spring of 1909, the debate became associated with the status of children and the young. In fact, children and the young have always been, and will probably always be, an instrument for certain aspirations. It is always easy to make pleas upon the future of the children and the young, the future of the nation. However, the actual child welfare debate was concerned with some serious and real problems that had been identified in a report submitted by a particular committee in 1905.

The other party to the cinema debate was the cinema business. Its approach was mainly economic; the showing of films had to provide a sufficient livelihood. The Finnish operators could not exercise much influence on the films, virtually all imported, which were the material of the cinema business. The cinema industry did not directly participate in the debate until the late summer of 1910. But even if they did not make explicit statements, the cinema industry did contribute to the debate. The impact was reflected in the number of theatres, in newspapers and in the eventual street advertising. The Church associations started to pay attention to cinema precisely due to these phenomena. The number of cinema theatres had started to grow from the spring of 1906, but a radical increase took place in the autumn of 1907, with Helsinki cinemas, for example, doubling in number. The increase in the number of theatres led to tougher competition within the business which in turn was reflected in the newspapers, and probably also in the streetscape in the form of more abundant advertising. There was no way anyone could avoid paying attention to the cinema. The cinema conquered the streetscape just as the general concern for the immorality of the citizens reached its peak. The changing content of the cinema, with new narrative films, increased the concern and apprehension. By the spring of 1908, the internal unrest of the nation, the concern for the children and the increased popularity all coincided. The terrain was ready for the debate on the “immorality” of the cinema.

The peak of this debate was the Government bill on a cinema act, given to Parliament towards the end of 1920, with the final parliamentary debate in October 1922. Throughout the process, the same official theme prevailed: concern for the spiritual growth of the children and the young. However, underlying that was a concern for the general morals of the nation, as well as the desire of the old authorities, above all the Church, to maintain their position in a changing society. Child welfare authorities and the Church-related circles, as well as the school authorities, tended to emphasise the harmful influence of the cinema.



In early 1911, the Finnish police started to perform preventive control of films. However, the control was voluntary and the new instructions were intended to be temporary, to be revised shortly. But the instructions remained in force until the spring of 1919. From an international perspective, the Finnish situation in 1911 corresponded to that in Germany in 1906 when a centralised, yet locally operated, control system was introduced.

In Finland, efforts had been made to institute a nation-wide centralised preventive control system, but due to the opposition of the cinema business it was not achieved in 1911. In this respect, the Finnish development differs from that in Sweden and Germany; in both countries the contemporary cinema business took an active stand in favour of preventive film control. The cinema industry chose a minor evil between the alternatives: centralised control was a better solution than a locally operated practice which left much to individual discretion. The Finnish cinema business also adopted this principle as early as the spring 1911, but slightly too late.

No one was happy about the temporary preventive control instructions. However, the Senate did not amend them in the spring of 1912. The underlying reason can be found in the change in the political situation of the nation: in the 1910s, Russia made active efforts to bind closer ties between the Grand-Duchy of Finland and the Russian Empire. The Finnish authorities did not necessarily want to submit any such issues to the Senate as would have increased censorship in the country. Moreover, legislative work was virtually paralysed until the spring of 1917 due to the outbreak of the World War I.

The cinema debate almost died out in 1913–1915, to ignite anew in 1915 on the old basis but from a new direction. The premise of the cinema debate, child welfare, was not arranged through legislation. But in 1912, a statute had been given on child welfare, and along with the new civil servant arrangements, the institution of the post of the acting inspector of protective education started a completely new era in Finnish cinema debate. The statute on protective education also made it possible to interfere with preventive film control, and this possibility was also exploited.

Consequently, the Senate reopened the cinema issue in 1916. Besides the societal development, the underlying motivations also include the changes that had taken place in the cinema business in the autumn of 1915. After a few years of standstill, the number of cinema theatres in Helsinki started to increase rapidly during the 1915 autumn season. Due to sharper competition, cinema advertising also increased. In fact, the situation was similar to that of the autumn of 1907, eight years earlier. The repertoire had also undergone changes. The Asta Nielsen films had been attracting attention since 1911. The Danes had introduced new kind of social drama, the contents of which did not meet with the approval of the circles emphasising morality. These so-called social dramas, as well as other longer drama-like films, became increasingly frequent. Another considerable change was brought about by new American comedy, with Charles Chaplin as its most popular representative. His wild ways met with discontent because Chaplin was seen to mock the basic values of society, thus

providing a wrong vision of the world for the children and the young.

The Finnish declaration of independence and the civil war which followed in the spring of 1918 interrupted the debate on cinema. The debate on preventive film control also assumed two new dimensions. An economic factor was connected to the control issue: not only taxes but also some of the income of the cinema business should be channelled to cover the constantly growing administrative expenses of the newly independent state. The situation of children had weakened after the civil war, and child welfare became an increasingly burning issue. Quite surprisingly, a suggestion was made to solve the problems through the nationalisation of the cinema business. A separate committee was instituted to implement this plan and to make practical proposals. In fact, the committee did submit a proposal which led to the Government bill of 1920 on the nationalisation of cinema imports and distribution.

The threat of nationalisation woke up the cinema business. The institution of a cinema committee led to the unification of the cinema business in November 1918. The same thing had happened in Sweden ten years earlier, and now the Finnish development followed the international trend. Within six months, the country established centralised film control, which operated, however, on a voluntary basis. But since the preventive control system was organised by the cinema business, it is probable that virtually all publicly shown films were controlled. In fact, the measures launched by the cinema business very rapidly created a situation which others had been striving to achieve for the past ten years.

The Ministry for Church Affairs and Education nominated the members of the State Film Board, which was, in principle, independent of the cinema business. However, the Board clearly wanted to influence the current cinema debate by trying to prove its own efficiency, and thus its own indispensability. The Board prohibited new films following the progress of the work of the cinema committee or the Government bills in Parliament. In fact, one cannot avoid the impression that the Film Board was working in some kind of collaboration with the cinema business.

In the autumn of 1921, the organisation of the Board changed, and along with the new name, Film Inspection, the control practices also changed. A new, clear practice was adopted, with the explicit aim of efficiently limiting the number of films permitted for children. The practical implication of these measures was the change and qualitative improvement of the repertoire targeted to children and the young. This resulted in a decrease in film-related criticism while satisfaction with the cinema increased. The measures also led to a radical decrease in cinema audiences in 1921. This clearly demonstrates the role of children among the cinema-goers.

In October 1922, the cinema act was in final debate in Parliament. The economic basis of the cinema act had been questioned and proven wrong, meaning that the nationalisation of cinema could provide more expense than income to the State. The film repertoire had also changed so that letting children

to go to the cinema was no longer considered to be dangerous. Therefore, there was no longer a need for a separate cinema act. The dispositions related to preventive film control had already been eliminated earlier from the legislative bill, and so the situation remained unchanged. However, Parliament did take notice of the situation, and a resolution was presented regarding a new preventive film control act.

Started in 1908, the cinema debate had been going on almost uninterruptedly, with the climax in the 1922 parliamentary debate. That marked the end of the debate on preventive film control. Later, the debate of the 1920s continued between the cinema business and the government, with the focus on cinema taxation. As of the beginning of 1922, taxation had become more advantageous but the cinema business was not content with that. During the 1920s, the National Board of Education, the child welfare authorities and the Church virtually did not interfere at all with film control. In their own actual areas of competence, each of these instances had achieved aims which had influenced the situation of the children. In particular, the act on compulsory education played a very significant role in this respect. On the one hand, the cinema debate constituted part of a more extensive debate in the new nation's search for its own ideals and objectives. On the other hand, it was a question of the change in the old society and in the status of the former authorities. In the 1920s, they started to be a thing of the past and people began to focus on the construction of the new state.