

Maaria Linko & Kimmo Jokinen:

The New Unknown Soldier: The Reception of a War Film

51

Although the reception of visual communication, especially film, appears as an important field, it has not frequently been subjected to empirical investigation. In this article we present empirical data on the reception of a war film in Finland. In Finnish people's hearts, a special meaning is attached to this very film. However, we trust that our method and notions on postmodernism and on the possibility of conveying an anti-war message by means of visual communication might prove useful in the research of the reception of war films in other countries, too.

For more than thirty years, Väinö Linna's novel *The Unknown Soldier* has been the subject of lively discussion. Its realistic story about Finns in the 2nd World War has often been compared to *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque. The novel was first published in 1954 (English trans. 1957) and filmed by Edvin Laine the year after. The popularity of both the novel and the film has been unprecedented in Finland, and even in 1984, in an investigation made among readers, Väinö Linna was ranked the most popular author in Finland. Furthermore, *The Unknown Soldier* has been translated into more

than twenty languages, and the first film version has been one of the best-known Finnish films abroad. In Finland, 90 per cent of the adult population has seen Laine's film and nearly everybody is familiar with the main characters of the film. That one single art product should enjoy a popularity as broad as this appears exceptional as compared to any western country. Yet this phenomenon is typical of Finland, where class distinctions do not traditionally involve remarkable cultural differences.

The underlying idea in *The Unknown Soldier* is comparable to Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) or Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986). These films look at war from the point of view of an ordinary soldier, who never wished to be sent to the front in the first place. They attempt to grasp the real war experiences and the emotions involved. In the 1950's Väinö Linna's novel became a great success because, for the first time after the war, the Finnish public was presented a work of art through which they could relate to their own war experiences instead of the canonized, national interpretations. For Americans the most recent films depicting the war in Vietnam have had a similar therapeutic meaning.

The première of the film *The Unknown Soldier* by Rauni Mollberg in 1985, on Finland's Independence Day, December 6th, was preceded by great advance publicity. When the new film version was released, we became interested in assessing the significance of the story, written in the 1950's, and its subject matter in particular, to the Finns of the 1980s. Since social and cultural changes have occurred, interpretations of the same theme are likely to have changed, too. The topic under discussion is whether Finnish culture is characterized by uniformity or, as would be the opposite case, by new cultural differences, either regional or social. That is to say, our purpose is to analyze contemporary Finnish culture by means of studying the reception of the new film version of this old story about the war.

Some concepts of reception research

British media scholars have investigated the reception of visual products, such as soap opera, television news or even a Rocky film (Morley 1980; Walkerdine 1986). However, when studying a film generally classified as art, German reception aesthetics provided us with useful concepts, which leave the art product open to any interpretations (Hobub 1984).

The concept 'reception', as used in this context, is derived from German aesthetics (Jauss 1970). Reception is a process where the reader constructs the text in his mind. In every art work or 'text' there are open spaces, which the public will fill in with the meanings they attach to them. The recipient of a work of art is to solve the indeterminacies of the work (Chatman 1980). However, as there are no definitely right or wrong alternatives, questioning such a point as who "comprehended" the novel appears irrelevant.

52

In a viewing situation the historical, social and cultural context forms the basis for the spectator's horizon of expectations, a term launched by Hans Robert Jauss (1970). The horizon of expectations is an inter-related system of expectations, in which each art work is born at the moment of its historical appearance. It is based on the spectator's knowledge of the forms and themes of works and genres that already exist. No meanings can be given without previous meanings, and this intertextuality provides the substance for the production of literary conventions (Culler 1983). The spectator can receive the new work against the horizon of his literary or artistic experience, or by using the broader horizon of his life experiences. Rien T. Segers (1985) gives specific emphasis to these two aspects of the horizon of expectations; he calls them "the socio-cultural" and "the literary horizon of expectations". The relevant point here is, however, that as for every individual work of art, the horizon of expectations is subjected to continuous change.

Postmodern characteristics in reception?

In the 1960s and early 1970s Finland underwent a rapid structural change. Up to the 1950s Finland was predominantly an agricultural society, but in the 1960s and 1970s the percentage of people employed in primary production declined, whereas the number of manual and white-collar workers in industry and in the service branch increased remarkably. At the same time a modern welfare state was being built, and the standard of living improved. This radical transformation in the labour market was accompanied by a great flood of migration: hundreds of thousands of people migrated from the countryside to big cities in Southern Finland or even to Sweden, Finland's Scan-

dinavian neighbour. 'The great structural change' is a concept frequently used when referring to this phenomenon in this context.

The essential question brought up in our study is, what kind of cultural change coincided with this great structural change. In the United States and Western Europe certain cultural changes can be detected that followed the post-war reconstruction. A considerable number of rapid cultural changes have occurred since the 1950s and '60s. One of the particular fields of interest in the discussion related to the phenomenon has been the transition from modern to postmodern culture. Fredric Jameson (1984, 53-58) has pointed out that postmodern culture typically comprises pastiche, a mimicry of styles, a lack of historical perspective or perhaps even a loss of the sense of history, the breaking up a national states, heterogeneity as well as the growing importance of the multinational culture industry and the new high tech media. In this process, one of the most essential parts is the integration of aesthetic production into commodity production.

As to the reception of the film *The Unknown Soldier*, by altering the view maintained by more stereotypical history the new postmodern culture might cause a change in the attitudes towards the war and towards the authenticity of the novel and the film. The past would then be given new meaning, which might lead to the novel being interpreted in several ways, thus reducing the uniform frame of interpretation. Although we can question the idea of Finnish culture turning towards postmodernism (and perhaps the entire concept of postmodernism), we still believe that there is a general direction towards a more superficial and a more heterogeneous culture, perhaps due to the mass media and the vast breakthrough of the culture industry. The trend seems to be distinguishable even in the reception of *The Unknown Soldier*.

According to Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984), it is characteristic of the transition from the modern to the postmodern state that technological development and the growing use of computers change the nature of information and, consequently, the nature of culture, too. As the manageability and transferability of information gain more importance, information is justified by its usefulness, and the principal functions of information and knowledge are seldom questioned. On the cultural level this process may lead to great legitimate narratives gradually losing their significance. The old meanings disintegrate, and the cultural understanding of people living in modern society will be based on new codes more focussed on the individual. The *Unknown Soldier* has perhaps ceased to function as the great narrative of the people, as some kind of national therapy used to soothe its traumatic war experiences and to establish a national identity. In present-day Finland more subjective, varied and individual meanings are being attached to it.

Yet we should keep in mind that the cultural development in Finland has certain individual characteristics. We cannot off-hand compare Finnish culture with the culture of advanced Western European countries. Moreover, the great structural change did not transform Finnish culture evenly. How can we then characterize contemporary Finnish culture and the change which have taken place in it?

Method: interviews and press coverage

The material for the study was collected in two cities, Helsinki, the capital, and Jyväskylä in Central Finland, a city of 70 000 inhabitants and a centre of a fairly large rural area. The choice of the cities enabled regional comparisons. After the performances of the film altogether 86 spectators

were interviewed in a nearby café. Approximately every second spectator questioned was willing to participate in the study. We managed to get good variation in the interviewees' background and age; one third of them were women. All interviews took place in less than two week's time after the première.

During the thirty-minute interviews the interviewees were asked whether they had found any of the incidents or characters in the film particularly impressive and what kind of message they thought the film would convey to a present-day Finn. Above all, the spectators were encouraged to talk about their personal feelings about the film, and the interviewer avoided leading them in their reception of the film. The interviews were mainly analyzed with qualitative methods.

Part of the material for the study is derived from press coverage: everything related to the subject in the local newspaper, from news and columns to letters to the editor and even ads, was noted during a period of six months. The newspaper clippings from *Helsingin Sanomat* (the major newspaper in the capital) totalled 82 and those from *Keskisuomalainen* (in the Jyväskylä area) 25. The fact that the film was a current issue with wide media coverage enabled us to look more closely in to the impact that the press had on the spectators' opinions; whether it actually preinfluenced their interpretations of the film.

The film received exceptional publicity in the papers, most of it very encouraging. This publicity, naturally, had an impact on the discussions after the release of the film. Several themes that the spectators found important had already been discussed in the papers before the première, for example the realism and the anti-war message of the film. Even though several interviewees referred to these themes, one cannot claim that the press should have dictated the spectators' response to the film. The fact that these particular themes did become so central was largely due to the director's deliberate intentions which yielded response in the audience.

The changing heroes of war and peace

The characters of the film aroused particular interest among the spectators. For three decades these characters had been kept alive by frequent intertextual references in newspapers, books, discussions etc. After the release of the film, for instance, *Helsingin Sanomat* compared Mauno Koivisto, the President of Finland to lieutenant Koskela.

The media publicity centered conspicuously on the character of Antti Rokka. More than the other main characters, he reminds of a traditional hero. It is he who, for example, machineguns a platoon of Russian soldiers. Rokka is a symbol of agrarian peasant Finland, which ceased to exist decades ago. Even for the Finns of the 1980s manual labour, the outcome of an individual's work and survival in hard circumstances appear as unquestioned values.

Yet some cultural changes are taking place at present. There is a transition of interest from Rokka, a representative of agrarian peasant Finland and a traditional hero, to other characters on the side. This transition was already perceived when studying the reception of Linna's novel in the 1970s and 1980s (Eskola 1984), but the change was much more conspicuous in the reception of the film. In this respect it is possible to claim that the publicity work failed. The spectators also appreciated more ordinary characters than Rokka, for example sergeant Hietanen and lieutenant Koskela.

Both Hietanen and Koskela have a strong sense of justice, and Hietanen also expresses his feelings, from fear to attraction. Koskela was respected for his anti-authoritarian leadership. Koskela is the kind of leader that present-day employees would approve of. With his natural authority Koskela soothes the differences, brings the disputing parties together. He understands his men and wants to be one of them and share their hard life. He never requests any privileges. Hardly ever does he give orders. A middle-aged engineer described Koskela's talent as leader as follows:

I think that to make a Finnish man move, a special touch is needed. He will not go if he is told or threatened to do so. You need a certain touch with him, and it is important to live there among the men to make it possible. This Koskela did well but if you ask me, he still was not the same as the previous Koskela.

As a sign of time, not by mere coincidence, the resemblance between the characteristics and roles of lieutenant Koskela and sergeant Elias in Stone's Platoon is remarkable. Thus, Koskela's characteristics are also necessary and held in esteem in modern working-life and in the Finnish society in general. The modernization process in postwar Finland, i.e. industrialization and the changes in the occupational structure, urbanization and migration from the North to the South, have paved the way for cultural changes. Younger age groups have learned how to live in cities, they are more educated, and their ties to the countryside and the rebuilding period of Finland are weakening. New heroes symbolizing modern, urbanized and industrialized Finland are becoming more popular.

Problems of anti-war message

Andre Bazin (1973, 55-56) has argued that for most people, the ideal of a film is the representation of reality as completely as possible. Similarly, in *The Unknown Soldier* the realistic qualities and the anti-war message were important for most spectators. Realism was considered a highly positive characteristic of the film. For instance, a student of political science commented:

It was a very realistic rescription of how brutal war is. It was not left as an abstract description, but rather the opposite. The film also clearly showed that an ordinary soldier did not know why he had to fight.

The realism, however, was viewed from a number of perspectives: one spectator compared it to his own war experiences; another one to documented history; a third one to his subjective impressions or to the earlier film version. Presumably the way people view reality and authentic documented history is largely dependent on their personal experiences and stereotypes. Perhaps the products of multinational commercial culture mediated through the television and the other media are the most important sources of these stereotypes. From this point of view it is possible to find postmodern characteristics in the reception of the film.

Although the spectators considered Mollberg's film authentic in its approach to real history and emphasized that in the 1980s it is possible to tell the whole truth about the war in a film, they still – probably unaware of it themselves – compared Mollberg's interpretation of history to that of the previous 'original' film, to the one interpretation which, in fact, represents reality to them. A spectator commented:

The story in itself wasn't different from the book - and it wasn't different from the reality either.

The spectators interpreted the anti-war message of the film in a number of ways, though their reasons were stated only briefly. Several different attitudes towards war were revealed: for some spectators, the message of the film was the necessity of disarmament; for some, on the contrary, the film emphasized the traditional defence policy; a few spectators even brought up the idea of pacifist thoughts being totally unrealistic and disagreeable. In any case, the possibilities of a work of art to shape attitudes turned out to be problematic, since each interviewee referred above all to his individual horizon of expectations. Moreover, since the reason for going to the cinema tends to be entertainment, and the desire to participate by laughing is strong, the possibility of a pacifist message transmitted to the audience remains questionable. Horkheimer and Adorno (1982, 140) write: "There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh at. Laughter, whether conciliatory or terrible, always occurs when some fear passes. It indicates liberation either from physical danger or from the grip of logic."

Since the spectators focussed their attention on a whole range of details in the film, the story cannot have a field of meanings shared by all. The spectators' war experiences or their lack of them, their social status as well as their gender had impacts on the reception of the film. People in a high social position and without war experiences were about the only to refer to the film as a work of art.

The sexual distinctions, in particular, were conspicuous: the women emphasized the emotional side, for example, the soldiers' feelings about the war, their motives and their feelings about the homefront. The men, on the other hand, paid more attention to external factors, the plot, the authenticity of the scenes, and the relationships between people and objects rather than the characters' emotions and intentions. Seen from a larger perspective, these different approaches may be connected to the division of labour in society: women's tasks are still centred around reproduction, whereas men have always chosen fields where visible power is more important than human relations, and where it is possible to influence structures rather than individuals. The two following comments reveal this gender-oriented reception. The former is by a female researcher and the latter is by a male businessman.

This war was represented as a completely isolated phenomenon. Evacuees from eastern Finland were not shown much and I would also have liked to learn about these men's background and their families. And also their correspondence with their families. That wasn't brought in at all.

Only if you watched carefully, could you notice that the aeroplanes were too new. I must admit that it is not possible to get original planes but the armors and troops looked authentic. And the guns. All these explosions and shells were very well done.

Conclusion

The reception research offered us the possibility not only to study the ways meanings are given to a certain product of culture, but by studying the reception of this very product we could also approach some more general changes in society. At the same time our study indicates clearly how a work of art – or a product of culture industry – is shaped at the moment of its reception, and this reception is in constant change. Although the meanings attached to a piece of art may seem questions of individualistic taste, they are always related to specific groups and the historical time and society, where the work of art is received. A similar study on some films about the war

in Vietnam, especially if the reception of these films was studied immediately after the première, and for a second time e.g. after ten years, might reveal rapid changes in attitudes towards real history.

The Unknown Soldier continues to be of great importance to Finns, yet today it lacks a single, clear theme that everyone would agree upon, as it used to have up to a remarkable extent. The spectators respond to the novel or to the film mainly according to their own experiences, their gender and social position. Consequently, one can presume that the story no longer has the same significance to everyone; the spectators interpret the story according to their own horizon of expectations. When comparing the spectators' responses in Helsinki and Jyväskylä, we did not detect any great differences. If the uniform Finnish culture is falling apart, a change of this kind does not seem to depend on geographical factors. More important are the distinctions between men and women, and between the ordinary people and people in high social positions. Also, war experiences or lack of them was a distinctive factor: people with war experiences were not capable or willing to presume any aesthetic distance to the film.

Even though the war and the shared experience no longer carry such great significance to Finns, because of the story itself and its popularity The Unknown Soldier continues to be important. Most Finns know their "Unknown" so thoroughly that many of its lines have turned into clichés, the origin of which their users do not always even know. In the days it was written, the novel had a strong real-life of its own, and while reading or watching it, people can refer to the issues they find important, yet these points do not necessarily have to apply to the whole of Finland.

References

- Bazin, André (1972) What is cinema? Vol. II. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press.
- Chatman, Seymour (1980) Story and discourse. Narrative Structures in Fiction and film. New York: Ithaca.
- Culler, Jonathan (1983) The Pursuit of Signs. Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Eskola, Katarina (1984) '30-vuotias Tuntematon sotilas - kansallisesta terapeuttista ihmisten toiminnan tuloksiksi'. ('The 30-year-old "Unknown Soldier" – The Reception of a Finnish Novel in Postwar Finland'), Sosiologia The Journal of Westmarck society, 21, 4.
- Holub, Robert C. (1984) Reception Theory. London: Methuen.
- Horkheimer, Max & Adorno, Theodor W (1982) Dialectic of Enlightenment. New York: Continuum.
- Jameson, Fredric (1984) 'Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. New left review, 146.
- Jauss, Hans-Robert (1970) Literaturgeschichte als Provokation. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Jokinen, Kimmo & Linko, Maaria (1987) Uusi Tuntematon. Rauni Mollbergin ohjaaman Tuntematon sotilas -elokuvan ensi-illan aikainen vastaanotto. (The New Unknown Soldier: A Study of the Reception of the Film The Unknown Soldier by Rauni Mollberg in Finland). Jyväskylä: Research Unit for Contemporary Culture.
- Linna, Väinö (1957) The Unknown Soldier. Helsinki: WSOY. (Original title: Tuntematon sotilas).
- Lytard, Jean-Francois (1984) The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis.
- Morley, David (1980) The Nationwide Audience. London: British Film Institute.
- Segers, Rien T. (1984) Het lezen van literatuur. Een inleiding tot een nieuwe literatuurbenadering. Baarn: Basisboeken Ambo (Finnish translation 1985).
- Walkerdine, Valerie (1986) Video replay: Families, films and fantasy. In: Burgin, Victor (ed.): Formations of Fantasy. London: Methuen.